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Scavenging by Minors at Huruma Garbage Dumpsite: The Children's Story

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Introduction

Children and youth have been the subject of much debate, ranging from issues concerning their rights, poverty, homelessness, and in particular their work. Certain forms of child work have been found to be more beneficial than detrimental to children's well-being. These benefits could range from a higher sense of responsibility, self-worth, a sense of satisfaction, and an ability to meet certain basic needs. Nevertheless, certain work that children and youth get involved in may be hazardous and dangerous to their lives, and strenuous. The subjects of this study are involved in such kind of work and I sought to find out the children's reasons for engaging in seemingly unsafe work. Certain observations accruing from this study will be useful in modifying the way society thinks about children's work.

The study was carried out at Eldoret's major garbage dumping site in Huruma. Eldoret is a cosmopolitan town that lies in the western region of Kenya. It is a major transit point for long-distance trucks that ferry goods to neighbouring countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The city is served by an international airport.

Huruma garbage dump is the central place where all the garbage collected in the city ends up. It is also the place that hosts the main sewage dump for the whole city which is home to several factories, business premises and a population of about one million. The dump swarms with youngsters, and some older people, whose main occupation is to sift through the garbage in search of valuables they can use or sell. These are boys and girls of ages ranging from as young as four to

young adults of twenty-two. There are about forty to fifty youngsters at the site. These collectors use the water from the stream flowing near the dumping site to bathe in the open.

Rationale

Many African cities have seen an influx of large populations in search of livelihoods. The UN-Habitat's then Executive Director, Dr. Anna Tibaijuka, on 30 June 2009 told a conference on Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation in Africa that in 2008, the number of people living in urban areas exceeded those in rural areas, with Africa being the fastest urbanizing region. According to her, six out of ten urban residents in Africa are slum-dwellers, forced to live in deprivation with chronic lack of access to safe water, sanitation, sufficient housing, and security of tenure. The unfolding trend is referred to as 'the urbanization of poverty'. Employment opportunities and livelihood options are few and far between.

Children have also joined the older generation in this pattern of migration. However, they cannot get proper employment and have limited opportunities to create self-employment due to their limited education, experience, ability, and maturity. Consequently, they look for other means of survival, chief among them being street life, engagement in the informal labour sector, petty trade, begging, stealing, etc, in order to supplement family incomes. Some of the children have opted to go and live in major garbage dumping sites where they scavenge for discarded items for sale to be recycled or used for other purposes.

There have been some studies on scavengers outside Africa. Barboza (2003) mentions minor scavenging activities in Nigeria, Brazil, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, and Cambodia. He describes children working barefoot and shirtless, and in circumstances where it is survival of the fittest, on dumpsites in Vietnam. The children had to make sure that they got to the dumpsite before the trucks started arriving. Some of the scavengers arrived as early as three o'clock in the morning and stayed until after seven in the evening. They foraged in the dump despite the extremely high temperatures. He mentions children as young as five racing after garbage trucks. Another study in Vietnam showed that children working all night on rubbish dumps were among the happiest, despite the dangers and dirt involved. They had good income, and worked within flexible hours among themselves. The children were as young as six and they worked without adult supervision (Theis 2001:103, cited in Bourdillon et al., 2010). Another study argued that children scavenging on rubbish heaps in the Philippines valued and enjoyed their work for its excitement and the companionship they found there, to the extent that it proved difficult to entice them to leave it (Gunn and Ostos, 1992 cited in Bourdillon et al., 2010). As yet, there have been no major studies on child scavenging in Africa and this is a beginning.

The Huruma garbage dumping ground in Eldoret, Kenya, receives tens of truckloads of garbage of all kinds on a daily basis. The contents of these trucks include recyclable and unrecyclable items such as glass materials, plastics, paper, polythene, pieces of metal, boxes, and food items. The scavengers, who will sometimes be referred to as collectors, have cut out a niche for themselves at the dumpsite.

The collectors are faced with several difficulties in their daily activities at the site. Eldoret is a high altitude area with extremely cold temperatures that can go as low as 12 degrees Celsius during the months of April through August, with the coldest being July. The children are also subjected to harassment from the residents of the neighbouring Huruma estate, especially if they stray into this neighbourhood. Yet, despite these squalid and harsh conditions, they continue working here – something that confounds observers who think it would be better for them to find more 'decent' livelihoods. Some have been said to run away from their homes, internally displaced persons' camps, and even centres specifically set up for them to come and scavenge here.

With the introduction of free primary education in the year 2003, it was expected that many out-of-school children – including those who were homeless – would go back to school. Indeed, in the first few years of implementing the policy, there was a reduction in the numbers of these children on streets in Kenyan towns as a result of frequent swoops conducted by law enforcement agencies. However, with time the enthusiasm of the enforcement authorities started waning, and many urban centres are now teeming with homeless and/or out-of-school children.

I approached the subject of children's work from their own point of view because of the emerging concern about the need to understand children in their own right. Ansell (2005:21) reiterates two important issues: first, that children should be studied independent of adult concerns; and second, that they are actually involved in constructing their own livelihoods. The ethnographic methods I employed allow children's voices to be heard. There have been concerns that children's voices are seldom heard, but that it is their photographs that are common (Ansell 2005:28). This chapter gives a voice to the children's choice. At the same time, Woodhead (2007:34, 40) argues that children are social actors in the business of trying to make sense of their experiences, beginning at an early age to develop an appreciation of their and their families' circumstances. He continues to state that consulting them is respectful of their participatory rights. Bourdillon (2004:101-102) reiterates the fact that most studies present only adult perspectives while paying very little attention to children's views and agency in shaping their lives. He argues that scholars need to pay more attention to children's potential and actual roles in development. Finally, it is mentioned by Rogers (2009:155-156) that when evaluating the quality of life, it is important to consider the views of those whose well-being is sought. Children are key stakeholders in

the services and care provided for them, and so their priorities and concerns are of paramount importance given that these may not necessarily be the same as those of their parents. I also intended to ascertain the role played by families in encouraging their children's scavenger activities. While many families in Eldoret live in poverty, not all of them produce scavenger children. Thus the study aimed to shed light on the production of collectors.

Methods Used

There were three categories of respondents for this study. The main category was that of the collectors who worked at the Huruma dumping site. These were purposively sampled to enable more meaningful data collection, targeting those who had been at the site longest. I used three methods to collect data from the scavengers, namely, participant observation, intensive interviewing, and focus group discussions. I chose these three methods because they emphasized observations of natural behaviour and captured social life as it was experienced by the participants. These methods also allowed me to get a richer, more intimate view of the social world of the scavengers than I could have achieved using structured methods (Schutt 2006:320). During the interviews and group discussions, I used a guiding questionnaire. Data were collected over a period of two months.

Partnerships were built by establishing rapport in the initial stages of contact. Rapport was useful in ensuring that the respondents spoke as honestly and as freely as possible. Catherine, my research assistant, and I first visited the site on a Sunday. We found several collectors idling about. Some of them were rummaging through the rubbish trying to find anything valuable. They became a little hostile to us and started asking which media house we were from. We told them that we were not news reporters and one of them informed us that, one time, a visitor came to the site and took a photograph of him. The next day, the photograph was published in a local newspaper and this caused some conflict with his family to whom he had not revealed that he was involved in scavenging. Catherine then told them that she worked at the local government hospital and, indeed, one of the collectors recognized her. He came over to us and reminded Catherine of their meeting at the hospital. She was also able to recall Maina and so our friendship with him began. He said that many of them had been cheated into believing that they were talking to donors who would bring them money; thus the hostility from the other collectors. We explained to him that we were on a research mission. He sent away the other scavengers and told them that we were his friends and that anyone who needed help at the hospital in future should not accost us. Maina then became our guide and informer and he provided us with much-needed protection. He took us round the approximately one-hectare dumpsite, showing us garbage in various stages of decomposition. Light and heavy clouds of smoke billowed from different sections of the garbage dump while a pack of swine

and goats rummaged through the heaps. Maina discreetly showed us his store, a place where he kept his collections. He then informed us that this day he was not dressed for work. On noticing our surprise, he offered to go and put on his work clothes. He disappeared into the bushes behind the dump and came back a few minutes later, dressed in the clothes. However, he told us that he could not show us his work tool, a metal prong with which he scratched through the garbage because the other collectors would see him retrieving it from its secret place. We spent around two hours at Huruma acquainting ourselves with the place and chatting with the few collectors who were present that day. Maina then said that it was getting late and that he wanted to go home to prepare for his favourite football show in the evening. He therefore took us on a brief tour of the slum area around the dumpsite and even showed us his house. His mother lived a few metres from there and he told us that she was not at home at that time, so there was no need to pass by her house. We agreed to meet the following Thursday to start our interviews with the other collectors, and he promised to convince his colleagues to cooperate with us.

On the Thursday, I arrived at the Municipal Council Department at six o'clock in the morning. The Clerk-in-Charge assigned me a truck whose driver I shall henceforth refer to as Gilbert. Gilbert proved to be a very key informant for this study. As we rode around town loading the truck with garbage I noticed three collectors in the back. They assisted in loading the garbage onto it while they ran errands for the municipal loaders. They seemed to have good rapport with Gilbert and his colleagues and he informed me that they were scavengers whom he allowed to ride in the truck. These 'privileged' collectors started the process of scavenging for valuables in the truck before we got to Huruma. At one point, they showed me a half a sack of charcoal that they had found in the dustbin in one of the town restaurants. One of them, Tom, told me that this charcoal could fetch about sixty Kenya shillings (US$ 1 was at the time equivalent to approximately Ksh. 75). As the garbage heap grew in the truck, all the collectors and loaders in the back would alight and Gilbert would engage the compressor to push the garbage to the back to make space for more garbage to be loaded. When the truck was full, we headed for Huruma. As we neared the dumpsite, he stopped the truck and all the scavengers alighted with their collections for the day. Gilbert explained to me that the Huruma scavengers were not happy that he gave privilege to some collectors to start scavenging in the truck before arrival at the site. And as if in confirmation, during my interview that day with the collectors, some of them reported to me that Gilbert and his fellow drivers gave priority to other collectors from town and that, in fact, some of the valuables they collected were given to the municipal council workers. A twenty-year-old collector told me in no uncertain terms to tell Gilbert and his colleagues to stop subjecting them to unfair competition while they were in paid employment.

As soon as I alighted from the truck and tried to approach the collectors, the younger ones scurried off. Gilbert told me it was because they feared me. The older ones, on the other hand, were curious to know the purpose of my assignment. We told them that I was a teacher and that I had come to learn about their problems. They asked me to explain to them what I needed to know and how they would gain from my mission there. Gilbert helped me to organise them and to seek their permission to record our discussions. The children started opening up gradually and I realized that Maina had told them of my impending visit.

During subsequent visits, I requested that we sit in a circle. The purpose of this sitting arrangement was to reduce the distance between us and to minimise any barriers that would interfere with the free flow of information. During the whole period that I visited Huruma, I dressed casually.

Second, neighbourhood residents were conveniently drawn from the estate immediately surrounding the dumping site for discussion of their perceptions of the collectors' activities. This depended on their availability, willingness, and ability to communicate in a common language. These included three government administrators (the chief of the location, the assistant chief, and the village elder), business owners and the residents. There was one group of five business owners and another group of seven residents. I did not put them together in one group because I wanted them to have uniformity of perspectives.

Third, the municipal council workers who delivered garbage at the site everyday were interviewed on how they perceived child scavengers. All focus group discussions were carried out in unstructured interviews.

We faced some challenges in carrying out this study. At first, the municipal authorities, especially some of the administrators, suspected that their work was under investigation. I had to explain to them the exact nature of the study and how the information would be used. When I first went to them, they said I was not authorized to ride in their trucks. Second, they were worried that I was going to report any anomalies I would notice at the department. When I gave them a letter of introduction from my employing organization, the Clerk-in-Charge agreed that I could go along in one of the trucks. However, some of the staff were still reluctant to have me around them as they went about their work. For instance, the driver of the first truck I boarded seemed uncomfortable with me. I had been assigned this truck and I got onto it but as soon as the driver arrived, he grew cold feet. He put me through a 'grilling' session on what my agenda was with collectors. He pointed out that he feared liability in case I got injured by the scavengers when we got to Huruma. The loader riding with him reiterated that the scavengers were quite unruly and that they could even snatch my camera. I therefore alighted and waited for ten minutes until Gilbert came in 'his' truck.

It is an important aspect in every research study to explain to participants what the information sought from them will be used for. This became apparent when the Municipal Council workers wanted an explanation of why I was interested in garbage collectors. To them, scavengers were not important people in society and I realized that there was a need for public sensitization. A common name given to scavengers in Eldoret is *chokora,* a derogatory term which, according to Davies (2008:314), denotes homeless children who do not attend school, and who only beg, steal, sniff glue, work for their food, and are always dirty and unclean.

Some of the Municipal Council workers I interviewed also requested to have a copy of the tape I used in recording our discussion made available to them. I therefore had to incur extra costs to facilitate this.

The collectors were in the business of making a living and so my data collection was an intrusion into their programme. In fact, on the day I was with Gilbert, most of the collectors participated in the interview while scratching through the garbage. Nonetheless, this had the benefit of yielding more accurate information as naturally as possible. I even spotted Maina and I asked him whether he remembered me. He responded in the affirmative but he seemed quite absorbed in his work. Some of the collectors expected hand-outs from me for accepting to suspend their work in order to give me attention. Others were suspicious of my intentions especially during initial contact. This was especially so with the younger children at the site. However, being a helping professional, I was able to find ways to go about it. This is described in the next section.

Fig. 1. Collectors busy at work at Huruma

The Children

The majority of the collectors came from low socio-economic backgrounds as they indicated that they lived in the slum area just next to the dumpsite. Many of them came from broken homes while some of them were orphaned. During the interviews, it emerged that many that many of them lacked food and proper shelter while others faced abuse and neglect. One of the respondents, Kimaru, said that his father had abandoned his mother before he was born and that his mother had died soon after his birth, leaving him in the care his grandmother, who also died when he was only five. He was eighteen at the time of the interview and had been at various dumpsites for close to twelve years. According to the others, Kimaru had been at the site longest.

Those whose families were intact complained of idleness and need for money and food. They said that most of them attended school during business hours and only came to the site in the afternoons. These children mostly comprised younger boys and girls who claimed that they were bored at home because their parents, especially their mothers, worked all day. Ennew (1996:207) agrees that in urban settings, working mothers of children in difficult circumstances lacked child care, a significant recipe for what she calls 'streetism'. The collectors also supposed that they did not get enough food at home and that the dumpsite provided an alternative source of food. This is alluded to by Evans (2004:70) who states that children encountered a 'greater variety of food to be gained from the street'. According to Ansell (2005:47), many poor families were becoming increasingly unable to secure adequate food and their children were vulnerable to inadequate diets. One respondent showed me a polythene bag in which he had put all kinds of food items picked from the site. He said that younger ones fought for food with swine. The foodstuffs included *ugali* (a local staple made from maize flour), pieces of beef and chicken bones, bread, rice and *chapati* (a local delicacy made from wheat flour), decaying fruits such as mangoes, oranges, bananas, and lots of tomatoes. From interviews with Gilbert, such foodstuffs were often collected from restaurants while the fruits were found in the municipal market. For the children, this provided a balanced diet comprising starch, protein, and vitamins.

The collectors had very low levels of education with the most highly educated having dropped out at standard five (in Kenya, children join primary school in standard one at around age six, and complete their primary education in standard eight). There were three categories of collectors: those who were engaged at Huruma full-time, those who came in the afternoons after school, and those who came to do some collecting during the school holidays only. Most of those who did not attend school indicated that despite the promises of free primary education, they still needed money to buy school uniforms, food, and other necessities. Ansell (2005:47) asserts that one reason children drop out of school is to be able

to contribute to household survival; while Bourdillon (2009:23-24) argues that schools in Africa may sometimes be unwelcoming, demeaning and grim, and may lack essential resources such as books, desks and even classrooms. One boy, Kodwaran, who had run away from home, reported that his father was too harsh and that he gave Kodwaran too much work to do. He also said that his father used to force him to go school yet he felt too old for that.

Seemingly, with no proper source of income, some of these children were unable to meet their needs. To them, as indicated by Abraham Maslow in his hierarchy of needs, physiological needs such as food and clothing were more important than education. With low levels of education, most of the collectors could not find meaningful occupations in town because most of their competitors were better educated and consequently preferred by employers. Many of the collectors could barely write their names. Because most of the scavengers came from poor families, where other members most likely had minimal schooling, the parents might have been oblivious or even indifferent to the engagements of their children. Alternatively, because of their low levels of education and consequent low income, the parents allowed their children to work at Huruma provided they brought home some money. Indeed, as Lopez-Calva (2002) points out, the poverty status of the household and the education of the household head are the most robust determinants of child labour. According to him, under certain circumstances, a parent would rather send a child to work instead of sending him or her to school. However, this should not be used to conclude that parents are not altruistic toward their children.

Many of those interviewed had running themes of broken homes and female-headed households. Most of them talked of having only a mother or no parent at all; but hardly any of them mentioned a father. In fact, fifteen out of twenty-three said they did not know about their fathers. Evans (2004:80) notes one positive aspect of female-headed households as the greater freedom to engage in paid work. On the other hand, these households may face greater difficulties in gaining access to labour markets, credit, housing, and basic services. She enumerates part-time, informal jobs with low earnings, which are favoured by these females as beer-brewing, gardening, poultry-keeping, pig-keeping, and petty trading in foodstuffs and charcoal. These households are thus more vulnerable to impoverishment and insecurity, with negative consequences for the children.

However, one of the collectors, James, said that he did not know about his father but later, a key informant confided that James actually had a responsible businessman father. According to the informant, James had decided to rebel against his father because he was unhappy with the latter's choice of James' brother as overseer of his transport truck. When I confronted James another day about this, he just laughed it off and said it was not true. However, the manner in which he said it, with a naughty smile on his face, was not convincing.

Some of the collectors lived alone in rented rooms while others lived with their families; but all of them lived in the slum area next to the dumpsite. Most of the housing there was temporary, with cracked mud walls and iron sheets and only large enough for a bed and a kitchen area. The windows and doors were made of wood. Many of the collectors without families shared these rooms. Some of them such as Kevin did not have rooms of their own. Kevin mostly engaged in scavenging for foodstuffs which he sold to swine breeders at thirty Kenyan shillings per sack. He then paid twenty shillings to someone for accommodation each night. He fed on the pig food he collected. Kevin did not know his parents and he scavenged along with his twin brother who was not at the site the days I visited. The participants informed me that he was not mentally alright and that was why he did not even own a prong with which to scratch. When I asked him about using his bare hands in the garbage, he did bother to respond and instead asked me for money to buy lunch.

From the children's point of view, they engaged in collecting due to several factors including helplessness, the need to fill their leisure time, irresponsible parenthood, frustration, poverty, and general family dysfunction. Thus, as has been discussed, the dumpsite provided a sure and precise way to get around their situation while it helped to fill the gaps in their lives.

The Children's Work

The collectors arrive at the site in the morning hours to await the delivery trucks. As a truck approaches, they all follow it to be in the best position to start sifting through the garbage.

Many of the collectors did not like what they did, but said that there was no other way for them to get money. Others did not mind the work provided it brought them money. One of the collectors, Peter, was concerned that some of the garbage came with used syringes and needles which as stated by him, posed a threat to the younger children in this era of HIV. One thing that these children enjoyed was the autonomy with which they engaged in their activities.

Gilbert, Catherine, and the municipal council clerk all informed me that there was a destitute children's home in the town where needy children could go to be taken care of. On broaching this subject with the collectors, they all responded negatively. This made me wonder about their unanimous response to the subject. Then one of them said that the conditions at the home were not conducive for them. He said, 'How can I be told to cut grass around the compound before I am given food to eat? Even my late father did not ask me to do that when he was alive!' On saying this, all the others burst into laughter.

Seemingly, these children did not like to be told what to do or to be supervised as they worked. I had got to know that the local Department of Social Services provided food for needy children every day around lunchtime. On enquiring

about this too, all the participants chuckled. They said that walking to the social hall to get food was a waste of the time they would rather spend collecting valuables for sale. The collectors thus appeared to feel a sense of pride in being able to earn some money for food rather than to be provided with free hand-outs. This seemed good for their self-esteem and sense of self-worth and it may provide fertile ground for further research into children's work.

The conditions at the dumpsite are very hard on the children. As we approached the dumpsite in the truck, scores of children and youth started running after the truck(s) and directing the driver(s) as to the best location to empty the garbage. Some of them started pulling out items even before the trucks come to a complete stop. This struggle assures them of a vantage point from which to embark on their work. Each of the scavengers was armed with a metal prong with which he or she sifted through the 'fresh' garbage. And as if that was not difficult enough, a herd of swine joined in rummaging through the garbage. Consequently, the scavengers had to fight off the swine while, at the same time, making sure they continued searching.

Ansell (2005:171) has supposed that opposition to children's work has centred on the potential hazards it poses. He writes that children are more liable than adults to suffer occupational injuries due to inattention, fatigue, poor judgement, and insufficient knowledge. At Huruma, the competition for the garbage is so intense that the children sometimes throw caution to the wind in a bid to survive. One participant in the study showed me a large scar on his right thigh that has remained as a constant reminder of his difficult life. Julian was going about his collecting business as usual one day when a truckload of garbage arrived at the site. Together with his colleagues, he chased after it as usual. Julian decided to climb onto the moving truck but accidentally, he slipped and fell and the truck ran over his leg. He was seriously injured and after offloading the truck, the driver together with some of Gilbert's friends took him to hospital. He remained there for close to three months and he had to undergo major reconstructive surgery. I was saddened by the account, yet Julian and his colleagues laughed as they narrated it to me. It seemed as if the ordeal was only a temporary setback as they stated that Julian was back at Huruma soon after his release from hospital. In fact, whenever he omitted any part of his narrative, his colleagues would gladly fill in the missing facts.

Julian's story made me wonder how the collectors managed to pay their medical bills. It was encouraging to hear that the local government hospital provided free medical care for them. However, they indicated that whenever they visited the hospital, they had to dress in a certain way in order to pass as needy citizens. This was a very good example of how these children manage to negotiate their livelihoods in difficult circumstances.

Along with these, other hardships included being roughed up by the municipal council guards, aggression from passers-by and estate residents, and harassment from the police and the public whenever a crime was committed in the neighbourhood. Despite all this, the collectors continued their businesses here with determination.

The collectors indicated that most of them suffered respiratory-related complications and my research assistant confirmed this form her observation at the hospital. They told me that their work exposed them to risks of respiratory infections because of prolonged exposure to the smoke and stench at the dump. Gilbert told me that part of the garbage delivery teams' work was to set the garbage on fire in order to create space for yet more garbage. A study at the Stung Meanchey Municipal Waste Dump in Cambodia found dangerously high levels of dioxin in the soil and large amounts of heavy metals in the metabolism of children working there. These children sought treatment for rashes, infections, cuts and bruises (Barboza 2003:A4). Other illnesses that the children suffered were related to the occasional low temperatures.

Social Networks

There were strong social networks and a sense of comradeship among the collectors, together with a feeling of responsibility for each other. This was attested to by most of the collector respondents who intimated that whenever any of them became too ill, it was the responsibility of the others to help him or her get to hospital and to ensure that they got treatment. Veale et al in Evans (2004:70) affirms that some of the gains of street-life were the development of strong friendships and the satisfaction of being able to manage their lives. Davies (2008:319) found out that, indeed, scavenging and eating leftovers united (both males and females) in a common bond; other children did not engage in such activities. Another social benefit of living off the dumpsite was that the collectors were well treated by the staff of the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital where they received free medical treatment.

As children approach adolescence, peer influence increases while parental influence diminishes (Myers 2008:121). This may help explain why the bond these children have developed at the garbage dumpsite is very strong. At Huruma, they can interact with peers, learn from them, and provide each other with a safe haven from which to explore. On the Sunday Catherine and I first visited the site, we found several collectors sitting around and chatting casually. One of them had a radio on which he was listening to music. This was an indication that they had a sense of belonging to the dumpsite and that they felt at home in Huruma. Thus, as every human being needs a sense of identity, so the collectors have found that identity at the dumpsite, thereby passing time even on days when trucks do not bring in any garbage. In fact, one study of street children who lived in a dirty

polluted territory with open sewers and mud in Makutano in Kenya, revealed that they were actually relaxed and that they played without the threat of harassment. They were powerful in this territory and were considered dangerous and threatening. The children paradoxically reinforced notions of pollution and danger to create a safe and empowering world around them, and this was referred to by Beazley as 'winning of space' (cited in Davies 2008:321).

During the interviews, some of those who were not participating were busy playing after keeping their valuables in their 'stores'. Each of the scavengers had a 'store' that was well known and respected by others. On asking how safe their belongings were in the open 'stores', they told me that nobody dared touch another person's belongings. I was impressed with this sense of morality and respect for each other's rights. There was a high degree of organization at the dumpsite and the collectors seemed to have developed a sense of maturity not common among other children their age. As they played, I could perceive fairness, teamwork, and advocacy in their dealings; all these without any supervision from an adult. This concurred with Woodhead's observation that one function of work was that it provided an opportunity for children to learn skills like responsibility, communication, and teamwork (Woodhead, 2007:41).

The garbage site seemingly provided an escape from adverse conditions at home. According to Hungerland (2007:172), when children engage in activities that are unsupervised by adults and have their own money, it gives them a sense of autonomy they can scarcely find elsewhere.

Earnings

According to the children, they could not sell their wares directly in the market as they had no links with the recyclers. They depended on middlemen to buy the assorted items from them for onward sale to recycling plants. The collectors scavenged for assorted items such as tin, glass, plastic, paper, cloth, sacking, food, and many other valuables. They sold plastic for Ksh. 4 per kilogramme and paper for Ksh. 2. Pig food was sold to estate residents for Ksh. 30 per sack. On average, each scavenger made about Ksh. 100 a day, but this depended on how hard one worked and how keen one was in following the trucks. On a less fruitful day, each made only around fifty shillings. The scavengers complained that they were exploited by the middlemen who paid very little for the scavenged items. For instance, they (middlemen) sold a kilogramme of plastic for Ksh. 16, and sometimes even Ksh. 18, which was way above the buying price. I did not get a chance to verify this from the middlemen.

So how did they spend the small amounts of money they earned? Some of the younger children said that their parents were aware of their coming to scavenge and that they even contributed to the upkeep of their families. Others said that they used the money for needs such as food, clothing, and to pay for video

shows including European football. Some of them complained that the money they earned was so little that they had to share accommodation to cut on costs.

Those who came after attending school were mostly interested in foodstuffs. These were younger boys and girls who occasionally stumbled upon valuables such as tins or bottles which they exchanged with the older collectors already linked to middlemen. They in turn received favours in cash and/or kind – including protection from bullies – or for as little as two shillings. They were also too young to fight with the older ones for garbage and to negotiate fair prices for their goods.

Views of Residents and Municipal Workers

The views of neighbourhood residents differed sharply from those of the collectors. Residents were of the opinion that the garbage dump was a menace to them, given the stench that it produced during the rainy season. Second, according to them, it had led to cases of indiscipline among children who preferred to go and scavenge rather than stay at home to work. The dump made the children to want to get money at a tender age when they were supposed to concentrate on their childhood and education. Residents also insinuated that their own children liked to go and pick food items from the garbage. They thought that the dump attracted all kinds of children, some of whom were in the habit of stealing from them. They were concerned that whenever they reported these incidences to the police, they fell victim to acts of revenge. They were unhappy that the dump site exposed them such insecurity. As a result, they suggested that the site be relocated to another part of the municipality and that the government improves on its responsibility to protect its citizens. However, this would only be a relocation of the problem. It should be clear that the residents said nothing positive about the collector activities at Huruma. This is supported by Tagliaventi (2007:166) who confirms that children's views of their work differ a great deal from those of adults.

The municipal council workers were sympathetic to the collectors. As mentioned earlier, some of them allowed collectors to scavenge on the trucks. Their argument was that there was no point disposing of items that could be of use to collectors and that the garbage was a major source of livelihood for the children. They provided an example of a time when the municipal workers went on strike to protest against low salaries. The collectors held a demonstration in town demanding that the workers' grievances be addressed so that they could return to work and restore their (scavengers) lifeline.

On the issue of persistence of collectors, they suggested four main factors responsible for this problem. These included very large families, poverty, broken homes, and indiscipline in society. They thought that the public played a role in encouraging scavenging because they bought goods from collectors and also gave them handouts. Another point that emerged from my discussions with the

municipal workers was that the collectors did not like to take on paid employment and that they liked the 'easy' money they got after scavenging. They gave an example of a collector who got a job as a herd-boy, but failed to keep it and ran away after one week. In fact, Tagliaventi (2007:165) acknowledges the immediate and tangible satisfaction children derive from their work; and they are aware of discerning both its positive and negative aspects. The municipal workers explained that the collectors were uncomfortable with a programmed life such as is found in needy children's homes probably because of the discipline involved. They indicated that the majority of those who were taken to these centres later ran away. Hungerland (2007:171) suggests that children find tasks assigned them by parents [and other adults] undesirable, natural, unpleasant and boring. One important finding though, was that most of the adult respondents believed that irresponsible parenthood was the main cause of minor scavenging. They supposed that most of the children at the site came from broken or unstable homes that were mostly female-headed. This fact was confirmed in the discussions with the children themselves. As Evans (2004:86) notes, increasing numbers of children from households that had dispersed are turning to the informal sector to support themselves as families and communities are unable or unwilling to support them.

Conclusion

This chapter is partly a revelation of the value of children's work. Children use work to fill up their free time while they contribute to their upkeep. Not all children place a high premium on education, perhaps because the dividends are not readily realised. Children's work is not all negative as it may help them to develop a sense of responsibility and maturity in them. It also assists children's sense of autonomy while providing a positive way of avoiding 'adult domination'. This therefore should provoke society to rethink their attitudes about children's autonomy and independence. Invernizzi (2007:141) avers that when work allows greater control over the environment, the result is self-esteem and confidence. Children are creative beings with a certain capacity to negotiate their livelihoods. They are not merely empty vessels waiting to be filled with adult ideas. They should be given an ear; their opinions ought to be valued and incorporated in programmes targeting them.

Nevertheless, a certain degree of adult responsibility is still wanting. For instance, society should be ready to protect children in whatever they choose to engage in. This is in relation to providing and facilitating a safe environment for all children's activities. In the case of Huruma, for instance, medical and other establishments should be responsible enough to follow safety precautions especially when discarding used apparatus. The government should ensure that children and minors are not exploited nor taken advantage of. All members of society need to respect children's rights. They should provide good role models for all children.

From this study, I found out that most children enjoyed what they did in terms of work. The connotation of child labour may not be so for the children themselves. This is because children's work may provide a safety valve for pent-up struggles, frustrations, and emotions. According to the frustration-aggression principle, an individual's frustration can generate aggression when they do not get a safety valve for venting the negative energies that may result (Myers, 2008:553). They may therefore turn to destructive behaviours such as delinquency and violence. The minor scavengers at Huruma faced several challenges in their lives, and despite the frustrations they may have faced, they decided to channel their energies into a relatively positive pursuit. This pursuit was helpful to society in the recycling process and in the prevention of delinquent behaviour.

An important suggestion is that children who are involved in the informal labour sector could be provided with formal schooling outside their working hours. They could also be registered by the government so that they get protection and be provided with care where need be. The psychological benefits of paid work for these children could be investigated. Ways of making the work safer for them should be explored since working in the garbage dumps is hazardous in nature.

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