

## A Sporting Chance - how physical education is helping Ethiopian street children

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Tigist left home to face the tough streets of Addis Ababa at the age of 10. She was fleeing domestic violence and she prayed that the streets would be better than another night spent at home.

She ended up in the Piazza Area - an urban centre full of street children. To survive she sold tissue paper or anything else she could get her hands on. She earned less than birr 5 (\$0.40) a day - barely enough to feed herself. She recalls how prostitutes in nearby bars would hand her food in acts of generosity.

"There was no love in my home," she says, "my mother and my father are both dead. I was left with my uncle. He kicked and punched me. One day I fled."

She soon learned that some of the new friends she made on the street had been helped by a small NGO called Sport - the Bridge. One day she approached them for help.

That decision transformed her life. She has escaped the violence and, for the first time in her life, she says she has found happiness and fulfillment through sport. She plays volleyball and football and is taking steps to prepare for school whilst the staff and volunteers at Sport - the Bridge search for new relations who might be willing to take her in.

Like Tigist, all the young people participating in the Swiss charity come from the streets. The charity's ethos centers on the enormous benefits sport can give to youngsters who have endured trauma or neglect. "Getting joy from physical activity is part of a child's biology", says project coordinator Addisu Seifu. "Through taking part in games we can help advance their social skills and gain self-confidence. They learn respect for themselves and other people."

At the charity's sports centre, the children take part in formal and informal sports activities like football, volleyball and marshal arts. Formal lessons encourage fair play in a disciplined environment. Informal play allows the children to be creative, learning independence as well as mutual trust.

When there are disputes on the football pitch, a coach calmly intervenes. He tells them to sit down and listen. He discusses trust, teamwork and the importance of following the rules in football. "Learn these things," he tells them, "and you will enjoy the game."

They are also taught sports theory. Teaching sport in a class environment helps the children prepare for a return to school. Many have long since dropped out or have never even seen the inside of a classroom.

For the first year at Sport - the Bridge, children attend lessons during the day. In the second year, they are encouraged to go back to mainstream education. Over 25 participants are starting school again this year.

The reasons for leaving their families vary. Sometimes their parents cannot support them and so the children feel obliged to flee to the Ethiopian capital to eke out a living selling chewing gum or 'soft' (tissue paper). Others, like Tigist, are fleeing domestic violence.

The charity tries to address the problems which cause children to flee home. With the help of counselors, efforts are made to re-unite them with their families or, failing that, to integrate them into a caring foster home from where they can resume their schooling.

To help children return to their communities, Sport - the Bridge has a full-time social worker called Mestawet Eyayu. "Most of the time," she says, "children run away from their homes because of conflict or lack of support. I try to find the families of these street children. After contact, a series of counseling sessions help in convincing both parents and child to come together."

This outreach service has met with success. 109 children have been reunited with their families or have been found sheltered accommodation.

Mestawet admits that there are some families who do not welcome their children back. "Sometimes the child was thrown out for stealing or misbehaving and the parents don't want them back" she says. "Another problem we face when returning a child is the expectation of payment. This is not our policy."

Addisu, who is soon to become the country director after the Swiss team leave, explains that true integration must come through the creation of trust and unity and not through payment. Instead, the charity encourages income generating activities instead of handouts. Sport – the Bridge is on hand to train mothers in vocational skills to help them earn enough money to support their children.

So far, projects at the organization have been funded by its Swiss donors and organized by mainly foreign professionals and volunteers. This year, the NGO is being handed over to a new team of skilled Ethiopians. Now, the challenge is to secure funds for the charity's future.

Feeding and providing physical education to nearly 80 children is an expensive business. With the number of street children in Addis Ababa rising, there is also a pressing need to expand the capacity of the sports centre.

US\$37,000 alone is spent on physical education staff and nutritious food. More is needed to look after the children's health and welfare as well as administration costs.

To this end, Sport - the Bridge is looking for over US \$57, 000 from UNICEF donors to continue their project into 2007. Time is short. Funds available for 2006 have already been spent.

The children, oblivious to these problems, are still enjoying the joy of sport in a safe environment. The smiles on their faces are proof that, day by day, their time of suffering is being replaced by a future with possibilities.