

Conference shines a light on potential hazards for street children during 2010

UNICEF and civil society organizations gearing up to find sustainable solutions

The large digital countdown clocks are visible at all the airports, the excitement is palpable, advertising on the theme of the 2010 FIFA World Cup is predominant and plans to accommodate an estimated 2.7 million spectators, including some 350,000 – 400,000 foreign visitors are escalating. The world's largest football spectacular is expected to generate more than \$4 billion for the South African economy, the highest in World Cup history.

But amidst all this buzz, a dark question lingers, and it concerns the potential dangers that this massive global event portends for vulnerable groups within South Africa, particularly children.

Recognising the hidden hazards for children, and responding to concerns already raised internationally of increased risks of child exploitation and trafficking civil society organizations such as Molo Songololo and United Nations agencies like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF are already mobilizing for action and developing plans to assist children faced with this situation.

Bringing the issue of street children out in the Open

At the recent South African AIDS conference held in Durban, a panel discussion convened by Professor Nigel Rollins from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, helped shed some light on the troubling issue of children living on the streets. Panelists, representing the IOM, the Ethekweni Municipality and the KZN Alliance for Street Children, among others, noted that the numbers can be expected to include groups of unaccompanied migrant women and children from neighbouring countries.

Life on the streets

While there is a lack of sound research on the conditions and experiences of street children, recent findings paint a bleak picture. Civil society organisations speaking at the National AIDS conference said they found the median age to be about 16, years and that most of the children started their lives on the street at 13.

NGOs noted that the children were at the constant mercy of the weather and are preyed on by adults who also live on the streets. Many children reported a myriad of health problems – lice, bladder infections, headaches and flu – and most have incurred injuries through fights or being knocked by cars, they said adding that hunger is a constant feeling among the children.

No quick- fix solutions

The session also revealed two main aspects to the problem of street children, preventing more children from resorting to life on the street; and addressing the back-log of children who are already trying to fend for themselves, without adult protection on the streets of South Africa.

The first task, the experts noted, would require a strengthening of the social support systems available for children; whilst the second requires a strategy which is child-centered, and rooted in the Children's Act.

Mike Sutcliff, City Manager for Ethekeweni Municipality noted that in the past, during large-scale prestigious events in cities like Durban, street children miraculously disappeared, only to resurface after high-profile visitors had departed. This was seen as a non viable and inappropriate way in which to deal with the problem.

Many of the children who live on the streets left their homes due to multiple factors – violence, abuse, poverty, the death of their parents – they are traumatized and afraid, and there are many deep-seated psychosocial issues which need to be addressed in assisting them to leave the streets.

What is being done by UNICEF and others in the run up to 2010

According to research by University of KZN, 86 per cent of street children were excited about the World Cup; 13 percent said they looked forward to watching it and 7 percent said they wanted to see people from other countries.

A key focus of UNICEF's work will be with government and civil society partners to prevent and reduce risks of child exploitation and trafficking during the World Cup. Safe spaces will be established in proximity of the nine soccer stadiums for unattended children attracted by the events, and emergency care and tracing services will be strengthened for children who become separated from their parents during the games. Children, parents and foreign visitors will be sensitized on safeguarding children before and during the event.

The IOM is engaged in awareness raising and capacity building with government, civil society and law enforcement agencies to equip unaccompanied migrant children with knowledge and skills to help them survive. They have also been trained to deal with migrant populations in South Africa especially those brought into the country against their wishes for exploitative purposes.

In preparation for the 2010 event, the IOM is working with the appropriate authorities to ensure that people who arrive in the country are assisted with medical services, shelter and safe return to their home countries.

The Government's Justice, Crime Prevention and Safety cluster is currently coordinating national and provincial task teams on human trafficking. These teams, which comprise 14 permanent members, are currently preparing Action Plans in view of the Confederation and World Cup. The National Department of Social Development is preparing a specific Child Protection Action Plan. Local joint committees have also been formed in each of the host cities for implementation of the plans.

Looking forward to the 2010

Looking towards the World Cup, the Manager for Ethekwini, stressed that the key challenge is to ensure that the needs of street children as well as other vulnerable groups, are not compromised by the needs of the event and that vital services are available to all who need them, not just those who can afford them.

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Editor's Note: For more information please consult the following sources used in this article:

FIFA 2010 World Cup Research Project http://www.hsrc.ac.za/Research_Programme-Page-80.phtml

Rapid assessment of impact of 2010 FIFA World Cup on the abuse, exploitation and trafficking of children (Cape Town, South Africa: Molo Songololo, 2008)

Trafficking in Human Beings and the 2006 World Cup in Germany (Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 2007)

Faster, Higher, Stronger: Preventing Human Trafficking at the 2010 Olympics. (Calgary, Canada: The Future Group, 2007)

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