

Causes of Children Living on the Street in Urban Georgia: A Qualitative Assessment

Laura Murray, Paul Bolton & Katherine Semrau

**Applied Mental Health Research Group
Center for International Health and Development
Boston University School of Public Health
85 E Concord St, 5th Fl., Boston, MA 02118 USA
tel (617) 414-1260 fax (617) 414-1261
Correspondence to: Laura Murray, lkmurray@bu.edu**

&

**Michael Wessells
Program on Forced Migration and Health
Columbia University
17028 Little River Drive
Beaverdam, VA 23015
Tel (804)756-2700, ext. 2501 fax (804)756-2718
Email: mgwessells@ccfusa.org**

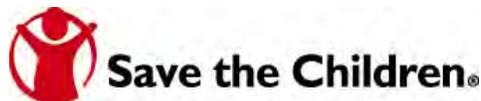


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Executive Summary

In Georgia, chronic poverty, the collapse of government support systems, and increasing family stresses and disintegration have created significant numbers of children who either live on the street (children of the street) or spend large amounts of time on the street (children on the street). Lacking adult supervision and support and out of the stream of family life and education that nourishes the development of most children, these marginalized children are at risk of exploitation, health problems, and engagement in drug use, crime, and prostitution. Although the situation of children who are of or on the streets is perhaps less desperate in Georgia than in other countries that are ravaged more severely by HIV/AIDS, armed conflict, and poverty, the plight of Georgian children warrants immediate attention, particularly since the Georgian government will soon close many institutions that have housed children. If Georgia is to continue on a path of positive development, political reconstruction, and peace, it is vital that appropriate support is provided for Georgian children, who comprise nearly half the population.

At present, relatively little is known about Georgian children who are on or of the streets. In addition to a paucity of hard evidence of the numbers of children, no systematic evidence exists regarding why children go to the streets or elect to stay there. In order to support children's reintegration into families and mainstream society, it is vital to understand the causes of children going to the streets, for it is only when these causes have been addressed that reintegration is possible. Worldwide, the development of community-based systems of care and support for children in and of the street is hampered by the lack of a strong evidence base regarding the impact of diverse program approaches. Also, program goals for street children typically include family and community integration. Unfortunately, the field lacks clear definitions of what counts as well functioning children, well functioning families, or well functioning communities, terms that are defined in different ways in different cultural, economic, political, and social contexts. Most extant definitions frequently privilege adults' views over those of children. Although children's views should not be privileged, they should also not be excluded. Thus a need exists to learn more about why Georgian children go to the streets and how family and community integration are defined in the Georgian context. There is also a need for a methodology that can be used productively not only to Georgia but also in other countries, recognizing the importance of cultural and situational differences, and that could apply broadly to other programs such as those concerning separated children and child soldiers in which family and community integration are important goals.

This project addresses these needs through a collaborative assessment involving faculty mainly from Boston University but also from Columbia University, the USAID Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF), USAID/Georgia, Save the Children/Georgia Field Office (SC-GFO), and local implementing partners. The goals of the project were to enable SC-GFO to more effectively support children of and on the streets through its Rebuilding Lives Project (RLP) and to obtain preliminary data that aid the development of instruments for assessing the impact of the RLP. The intent was to answer the question what causes children to go to the streets and to develop a methodology that brings forward children's views; elicits and builds upon local understandings of children, families, and communities; and enables the development of a systematic impact assessment and program enrichment methodology that could be applied in

different cultures and programs that support at-risk children. The project consisted of two complementary studies, both of which used qualitative methodologies designed to achieve the aims outlined above.

Assessment I

Boston University faculty conducted the main assessment—Assessment I—as the first phase of their suggested three-phase approach to systematic impact evaluation. In this assessment, local interviewers were trained on two specific qualitative methods: Free List Interview and Key Informant Interviews. A key part of this work was building the capacity of the Assessment I team, which consisted of local staff and Georgian graduate students from the Center for Social Studies, to conduct rigorous qualitative interviews designed to elicit local understandings and to minimize biases. Working in a partnership mode, the team assisted the faculty in tailoring the methodology to the Georgian context and language and learned how to ask open-ended questions and to probe in an effective, ethical manner for additional information and clarification.

The team also helped to shape the four main questions: (1) What are the causes of children going to the street? (2) What does a happy child look like? (3) What does a happy family look like?, and (4) What does a happy community look like? By design, the questions were stated broadly to encourage a wide variety of responses, which were to be listed item by item according to their order of occurrence. The latter three function-related questions were designed to evoke local understandings of a well functioning child, a well functioning family, and a well functioning community, respectively. Under careful supervision by the faculty, the trainees conducted free list interviews on the questions with 43 children visiting two centers in Tbilisi, and 16 children visiting a center in Gori. The team also received training on how to conduct Key Informant Interviews with persons from the community who are knowledgeable about the issues of children on the street and who had been identified by the child participants in the Free Listing Interviews. The data were collected in the period July 1 – 24, 2005, which was a relatively quiet time in Georgia.

A review of the free listing results from the three function-related questions produced a thorough description of a healthy child, family and community. The overlap across these areas was high, with many naming lack of fighting or quarreling, kindness to others, happiness, respectfulness, and loving and caring as important characteristics of a well-functioning child, family and community. Family members ‘treating each other well’ was also raised by a high number of interviewees. In addition, all three categories were considered well-functioning in the presence of good economic conditions (i.e. employment, food, toys).

A review and analysis of the ‘Causes’ free listing results identified two main categories of causes of children going to the street: (1) causes related to family issues that push children into the streets, and (2) causes related to factors operating in the street that tend to keep them there. The ‘family’ issues include poverty and unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, poor family relations, and changes in the makeup of the family (such as a parent’s new partner). The issues related to maintaining children on the streets include the formation of friendships, discovery of ways to make money (such as begging or stealing), and development of ‘habits’ related to street-life, such as being accustomed to hang around certain places.

Through key informant (KI) interviews, six topics—fighting/quarrelling, beating, alcohol and/or drug abuse, relationships with friends, family relationships, and “bad” parents—were explored further. The Tbilisi data are summarized here. In regard to fighting and beating, KIs discussed domestic violence between parents and parent-to-child as affecting the children going to the street. KIs noted that children observing fights between parents caused children to go to the street. Family relationships clearly influenced a child’s decision to live on the street, with KIs noting “lack of friendly relationships between parent and child” as a cause to go to the street. In addition, KIs noted that parents may force a child to beg in the street and that children may leave home to avoid this job assignment. KIs described alcohol and drug abuse as both a cause of children going to the street and an outcome of children who live in the street. As a cause of going to the street, several key informants noted that alcohol and drug abuse by the parents pushed children to the street. This abuse was usually linked to violence in the home. In addition, some KIs said that children are embarrassed by their parent’s addiction or the children themselves have become addicted and are forced to leave the home.

Although some KIs discussed a role of friendships (e.g., the “charm of socializing”) among the causes of children going to the street, the majority spoke of the influence of friendships once children were spending time or living on the street. Several KIs described in depth how friendships on the street quickly become their family system, one that is “better” than their biological family. For example, many KIs explained how everything is shared equally among children living in the street and everyone helps each other. Some of the KIs specifically described these friendships of children on the street as “stronger than other friendships”.

The success of this assessment provides a firm basis for proceeding with the subsequent phases of the assessment. In Phase 2, the Boston University team would use the qualitative data to develop a locally appropriate instrument to assess the issues that emerged in Assessment I and as well as indicators of child, family, and community functioning. This instrument would form the basis for assessing the impact of the RLP. In Phase 3, the instrument developed in the first two phases would be used in quantitative assessments. Following the intervention, the instrument would then be reapplied, with the results compared to those of the initial assessment, thereby assessing the impact of the intervention.

Assessment II

Whereas Assessment I asked participants to respond to questions about children on the streets in general, this assessment aimed to strengthen the evidence base by using a narrative approach to explore children’s understanding of their personal situation. It aimed to document children’s understanding of why they themselves are on the streets, what would enable them to live at home and continue their education, what subjective changes inform their decisions to reintegrate with their families or to reengage in education, and what benefits they see the project as having provided. This narrative approach is well suited to the longitudinal tracking of particular children, providing an idiographic analysis that complements the nomothetic analysis offered by the Boston University team. Also, the narrative approach is useful in bringing forward the voices of young people who have lived on the margins of society, identifying individual differences, and illuminating how children’s perspectives differ from those of adults. A sub-goal of this narrative assessment was to offer preliminary analysis of the impact of the RLP project.

The assessment was conducted during the period July 1 – 24, 2005 by a team consisting of a faculty member from Columbia University, SC-GFO staff, and four graduate students from the Center for Social Change. The assessment consisted of individual and group interviews in Tbilisi and also Rustavi. Rustavi was selected as a site because it has a different sub-group of children, including children who live on the streets. Most of the Rustavi children live in extreme poverty and do not attend school. At the time when the assessment was conducted, the RLP had worked in Rustavi for only five weeks by means of a mobile team that reached out to children on or of the street and a recently established Center. In Tbilisi, five children (three boys and two girls) between the ages of 13 and 15 years were interviewed individually. Also, separate focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with small groups of the children's family members, staff of the local implementing partner, and teenage children who were not part of the RLP, respectively. Because of the potentially sensitive nature of the interviews and FGDs, care was taken to respect the principles of informed consent and confidentiality. In Rustavi, five children (three girls and two boys) were interviewed individually, as were three parents of the children who had been interviewed. In Rustavi, three FGDs were conducted with educated community members who were not associated with the RLP, teenagers who were not associated with the RLP, and Rustavi staff of the RLP, respectively.

Broadly, the results converged with those reported in Assessment I. In both cities, children on or of the streets pointed to bad family relationships and poverty as significant factors that had led them onto the streets. The children told harrowing stories of how beatings and abuse by parents or siblings, or exposure to fighting between parents had led them to go to the streets. In many cases, parents' alcohol abuse contributed to the bad relationships, arguments, and fighting within the family. Family stresses were related also to family disintegration and reorganization associated with death of one or both parents, remarriage of a parent, or changes in a parent's ability to care for a child. When the children were with their parent(s), they typically lived in difficult circumstances of poverty and sub-standard housing. In Rustavi, which surpasses Tbilisi in regard to the percentage of children who live or have lived on the streets, numerous children expressed strong anger toward their parent(s). In both cities, children's narratives included as important subtexts the theme that poverty contributed to their decisions to leave home. For some children, another theme was the lure of the streets, which offered freedom, access to computers, and opportunities to be with friends.

Parents' narratives, too, indicated the importance of the push and pull factors that lead to children going to and staying on the streets. In Tbilisi, however, children placed greater emphasis on the role of troubled family relations, whereas parents placed greater emphasis on poverty and the attractions of the street for teenagers. In regard to poverty, several parents emphasized the importance of skill training for their children and expressed a willingness to teach vocational skills to various children if the appropriate tools were made available.

To describe the children's personal characteristics is inherently difficult because of individual differences and the possible existence of different sub-groups of children, a topic on which few hard data exist. According to the Tbilisi staff, some children go the streets because of difficult family situations, whereas others are "wanderers" who go to the streets even if their family situations are favorable. The staff also hypothesized that there is a small subgroup of those who are potential criminals and who see the streets as places of opportunity for criminal activity.

Aside from the question of subgroups, the children who come to the centers describe themselves as having a mixture of positive and negative characteristics. The children spoke passionately about their friends and said they take pride in helping their friends by, for example, loaning them money when they have an unpaid debt. The RLP staff members commented that the children have good communication skills, have much more life experience than other children their age, and display leadership qualities. The children love to play, obtain new information, and do math. They are particularly good at counting money, an essential skill for people on the streets. Numerous children expressed strong concern for beggars and other unfortunate people.

On the other hand, the children describe themselves as easily angered and as fighting with others, suggesting that they have poor impulse control and weak skills of managing anger and handling conflict without resort to fighting. These characteristics make for potentially explosive interactions with parents who are also inclined to fight and have destructive behavior patterns. Particularly in Rustavi, many children either sniff glue or are believed to have done so. The Rustavi staff described the children as exhibiting hyperactivity, poor concentration, excessive curiosity, poor memory, problems in mental and physical development, high levels of anxiety, and a paucity of spheres of interest on entry to the Center.

A worrying observation was the high levels of stigmatization of children on or of the streets and the low levels of knowledge of supports for the children evident in the FGDs with both community members and teenagers who are not associated with the RLP. The participants showed reasonably high levels of empathy with the situation of children on the streets and an understanding of the push and pull factors that lead children to the streets. Also, some children in the FGDs expressed a willingness to befriend children on the streets. Still, both the adults and the children reported consistently that children on the streets are regarded in Georgian society as being rude, evil, mentally underdeveloped, and unclean. In Rustavi, where the stigmatization problem appeared to be greater than in Tbilisi, the children were also described as alienated from society at large. In both cities, adults and children agreed that parents of children in most families would not permit their children to associate with children on the streets or to invite such children into one's home. In addition, none of the adult or child participants in the FGDs displayed knowledge of existing supports for children on the streets. Fortunately, the FGD conducted with adults in Rustavi indicated that community adults do care about the situation of children on the streets and want to get involved in supporting them.

Although the RLP is in its early stages, tangible impacts and benefits to children in Tbilisi are already visible. A very hopeful sign is that the parents of the children readily point out that since their children started coming to the Center, they have become less aggressive, more friendly and cooperative, and less preoccupied with computers, and they have better relations at home. Children echoed these sentiments, saying they have become more cooperative, less prone to fighting, more willing to care for their family members, and more respectful of the rules set by their parents. The staff report that they see positive changes in children emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development.

In Rustavi, too, significant improvements in the children's well-being were reported by family members and staff. Parents reported that their children are more likely to come home and are more helpful when at home, and they commented that they are happy their children

have a safe place to stay when they are not at home. The Rustavi staff also reported seeing positive changes, most notably improved personal hygiene, learning of elementary rules of behavior, increased willingness to respect others, increased trust, decreased cynicism and aggression, increased ability to compromise and collaborate with others, reduced frequency of glue sniffing, increased sense of responsibility, and increased frequency of laughter among the children. They also reported that through outings in the park and other places, local people have decreased their stigmatization of the children, and the RLP children are increasingly able to play with other children. The Rustavi staff attribute these changes to their love of the children, acceptance of children “the way they are,” their willingness to set boundaries and to provide positive role models, their provision of activities that build cognitive, emotional, social and physical skills, and their engagement of children in an ongoing process of socialization that prizes collaboration, nonviolent interaction, and a sense of responsibility. Although these observations are preliminary, they offer useful insights into why the project exerts a positive impact, and they point the way toward future improvements.

Options for Enriching the Rebuilding Lives Project

Since this is a draft report that is still under review by SC-GFO, it would be inappropriate to present firm recommendations at this stage. It is possible, however, to outline options for enrichment that emerged from the two studies combined and that SC-GFO might consider on grounds of feasibility and other criteria.

1. Data Sharing and Reflection

With data collection and analysis completed, this could be an appropriate time for SC-GFO to reflect on the data and their implications for current programs. A valuable first step would be to share the results in whatever form seems most appropriate with the Centers in which the assessment was done, both children and adults, and any other interested persons in the communities. A preliminary presentation of results was made to SC-GFO and the local implementing partner - Child & Environment - by Laura Murray and Katherine Semrau on July 22, 2005. The results could be discussed in light of current Center activities and the RLP with the intent of thinking through and prioritizing the various options outlined below and others that SC-GFO staff and partners discern.

2. Added Skills-based Training for Children and Families

In view of the powerful influence of poverty in the lives of the children and families, it might be useful to expand vocational education for both children and families. To support reintegration, children and families could participate in skills training that market analyses indicate could lead to employment and a steady income. Also, there may be additional programs that focus more on increasing the healthy behavior patterns and good-decision-making skills in children who already spend significant portions of time on the street. However, since the data also indicate the importance of relational factors, it would be useful also to focus on building in both children and families relational skills such as communication and nonviolent conflict resolution.

3. Greater Emphasis on Prevention

Since the two studies have effectively identified the factors that place children at risk of going to the streets, it is possible to identify cases of likely separation in advance and intervene by

providing a mixture of vocational skills that alleviate economic stress, offer incentives more potent than those offered by life on the streets, and build relational skills that reduce destructive conflict and make it more likely that children will stay in the home. In light of the harm done through children being on the streets, increase emphasis on a preventive approach would seem to be a good investment. Primary prevention programs aimed at children who spend time on the street may also focus on families or caregivers identified as high-risk. For example, the Centers may also design a “Parents Night” concept where they offer education on a variety of relevant topics such as “How to care for an oppositional child”, “Where to go to get help with ____ (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse).”

4. Increased Community Involvement

In view of the strong stigmatization of children on the street, it is vital to engage community members on issues of children on and of the streets. A useful first step is to provide information about the children in ways that undermine the prevalent negative stereotypes and about the supports for children that exist. In addition, useful steps toward a more community-based approach would be to identify community resources, to help mobilize group discussions and planning efforts, and to support self-initiated projects on behalf of at-risk children and families.

5. Greater Family Participation

Frequent meeting of parents and staff, and also meetings of parents, would be useful in enhancing parents’ sense of responsibility and involvement in the RLP. Already parents have provided useful feedback and suggestions. Parent associations could be a valuable resource to draw upon.

6. Greater Child Participation

Since the children on the streets exhibit leadership qualities and, as this project has demonstrated, have a wealth of useful ideas, it might be appropriate to engage children more fully in designing project activities such as methods of assessment. Some children seemed to be interested in sports and the acquisition of various skills. To consider the children’s interests in designing activities would enhance their satisfaction with the RLP centers and increase their desire to stay off the streets.

These options and suggestions are offered in a spirit of dialogue to the RLP team and its stakeholders, who have exhibited leadership on behalf of at-risk children in Georgia.

Needs Assessment and Program Evaluation: Next Steps

The different assessment methods used in Studies I and II both yielded valuable and convergent results. As part of this project, a number of local Georgians were trained in qualitative methods and were quick studies. The fact that many of them had experience working with children was evident in their ease of conversing and making children of all ages feel comfortable quickly. As such, we feel these interviewers could easily be trained to train and supervise others. For these reasons, both the BU and CU teams strongly recommend that the project continue on to Phases 2 and 3.

Phase 2: Instrument Development and Testing uses the qualitative data to develop a locally appropriate instrument(s) to assess the issues that emerged in the qualitative assessment as well as indicators of child, family and community functioning. This instrument would be tested to assure that it is a valid measure. This instrument would then form the basis for assessing project impact.

Phase 3: Quantitative Assessment includes using the instrument developed in phases 1 and 2 to assess needs and to provide a baseline. The instruments is then repeated after the intervention and compared with the initial assessment, in order to assess impact. These instruments can be used to conduct accurate assessments of other programs addressing the same issues among the same population.

In summary, our experience in Georgia so far, based on two trips by BU faculty and conversations with SC-GFO and local partners, suggests that there is both a need and interest for these types of qualitative assessments in other areas of programming (in addition to programs for street children), and a substantial underlying capacity to do them.

General Introduction

In Georgia, chronic poverty, the collapse of government support systems, and increasing family stresses and disintegration have created significant numbers of children who either live on the street (children of the street) or spend large amounts of time on the street (children on the street). Lacking adult supervision and support, and out of the stream of family life and education that nourishes the development of most children, these marginalized children are at risk of exploitation, health problems, drug use, crime, and prostitution. Their plight warrants attention, particularly since the Georgian government will soon close many of the institutions that have housed them, thereby increasing the number of street children and their exposure to street life. As a social and economic investment in the country's future it is vital that appropriate support is provided for Georgian children, who comprise nearly half the population.

At present, little is known about Georgian children who are on or of the streets. Reliable figures are not available and there is no systematic evidence on why they go to the streets or stay there. Where the goal of programs is reintegration into families and mainstream society, it is vital to understand the causes of children going to the streets in order to address them. Having designed these programs, it is also vital to assess whether they are effective. Worldwide, the development of community-based systems of care and support for children in and of the street is hampered by the lack of a strong evidence base regarding the impact of diverse program approaches. Part of this problem is the lack of clear definitions of what counts as well functioning children, well functioning families, or well functioning communities, terms that are defined in different ways in different cultural, economic, political, and social contexts. Most extant definitions privilege adults' views over those of children. Although children's views should not be privileged, they should also not be excluded. There is also a need for an assessment and evaluation methodology that can be used productively not only to Georgia but also in other countries, recognizing the importance of cultural and situational differences, and that could apply broadly to other programs such as those concerning separated children and child soldiers in which family and community integration are important goals.

The work described in this report addresses these needs through two parallel qualitative assessments. One assessment was led by faculty from Boston University, in collaboration with staff from Child & Environment and Save the Children Georgia Field Office (SC-GFO) and supported by the USAID Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF), USAID/Georgia, and SC-GFO. The BU assessment had two purposes: The first was to explore the causes of children being on the streets, to inform activities conducted as part of the Rebuilding Lives Project (RLP) by SC-GFO and partners to reduce the number of urban street children in Georgia. The second purpose was to provide the preliminary data for developing instruments to quantitatively assess need and the impact of the RLP program. This is the first phase of a three phase process using both qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct locally accurate assessments and impact evaluations. The process is described in more detail in the section 'xx'. It has been used by BU and NGOs elsewhere, but this was the first time it has been implemented in Eastern Europe.

The second assessment was conducted at the same time as the BU assessment, and was led by faculty from Columbia University in collaboration with the Georgian Institute for Social

Research. It was also supported by the USAID Displaced Children and Orphans Fund (DCOF), USAID/Georgia, and Save the Children/Georgia Field Office (SC-GFO). This assessment used a different qualitative approach but also explored the reasons for children being on the street. Our intention was to compare the results of the two studies, as a check on the accuracy of the results of the BU assessment. The Columbia assessment also explored local perceptions of the RLP program.

Background

In November 2004, staff at DCOF approached faculty within the Applied Mental Health Research Group (AMHR) at BU and at CU for assistance in generating knowledge on the efficacy of child interventions supported by DCOF, especially psychosocial interventions. After initial discussions, it was decided to begin addressing this issue by first working with a limited number of DCOF programs; to develop locally methodologically sound and culturally appropriate measures of children's well-being and function, since a major reason for lack of efficacy was a lack of such tools and development methods.

DCOF chose to begin this initiative in Georgia, working with Save the Children on their recently established Rebuilding Lives Project (RLP). The overall goal of RLP is to “strengthen and expand local capacities to promote the physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial well-being of vulnerable children in Georgia.” Its objectives include:

1. To increase use of critical social services,
2. To increase quality of national standards, regulations and compliance,
3. To increase social and economic integration,
4. To increase capacity of families and communities to respond to the needs.¹

In March and April 2005, representatives of DCOF, BU , and CU visited Georgia and met with: local USAID staff, staff of SC-GFO and SC-GFO’s local implementing partners, and with officials from the Georgian government who have a direct interest in the issue of street children. In these discussions, general agreement was reached on the need for better assessment of the issues affecting street children. It was also agreed that Georgia, and the RLP project in particular, were appropriate site for the DCOF initiative, and that the first phase of instrument development, a qualitative assessment, should proceed. In accordance with the interest of SC-GFO staff, the group decided to expand the aims of the qualitative assessment beyond generating information to develop appropriate instruments. The assessment would also focus on the causes of children living in the street, in order to inform RLP programming. Faculty from BU and CU planned to return to Georgia in July of 2005 to conduct the qualitative assessment with SC-GFO and local partners.

Overview and Rationale of Approach

¹ Assistance Georgia Website <<http://www.assistancegeorgia.org.ge/Content/Projects.aspx?ProjID=622a0d16-4aaf-4b9c-9076-bc0b539c48b3&ProjInd=0>> Accessed August 19, 2005

In discussions with DCOF faculty at BU suggested a 3-phase approach that would provide information on the nature of issues affecting street children (in order to inform programming) as well as developing instruments to quantitatively measure project impact. The approach is based on previous experience with meeting similar needs in other projects. The method begins by investigating how street children and other knowledgeable people in the affected communities think about the issues of children living on the street and those issues being addressed by the SC-GFO project. This provides formal input into the project focus from people most affected. One purpose of this is to try and ensure that the project addresses issues that are a priority to this group and in ways that makes sense to them. The assumption is that projects that do this are more likely both to address key issues, and to win cooperation of the affected groups, both of which are vital to achieving impact and sustainability.

An understanding of how the community views issues addressed by the project is also valuable in designing measures to assess impact. Typically projects use measures developed in other countries which are then translated into the local language. Usually there is little attempt to adapt or develop measures appropriate to the local culture or situation, or to achieve a translation that uses the vocabulary of the groups being assessed. Even more uncommon is testing to determine whether the assessment tools accurately measure what they are supposed to measure. This is particularly true of measures that attempt to assess improvements in functioning, which is one of the major desired effects of psychosocial programming and a prime focus in the current project. Using the approach developed by BU, the way in which local people understand the issues affecting them and how they perceive good function, and the actual language they used to describe these concepts, is recorded and used to create questions about them. In this way, measures that are understandable to local people and reflect their priorities may be developed. Knowing how local people understand these issues is also used in testing the measures (see Methodology below).

Once the measures (or instruments) are developed and tested they are available for use in assessing project impact. This is typically completed by using the instruments early in the assessment to assess the baseline levels of problems and of function. Using the instrument in this way also confirms that the problems are significant in terms of prevalence (i.e. that they are common). Impact assessment is then done by repeating the measurements at the end of the intervention and comparing the results. In some programs, measurements may be taken during the program in order to check progress.

Assessment I²

In July 2005, Faculty of Boston University (BU) and Columbia University (CU), with the support of the DCOF/USAID and USAID/Georgia, worked with SC-GFO and local implementing partners on a assessment to inform SC-GFO's 'Rebuilding Lives' project (RLP). The assessment had two overall aims: The first was to provide information on the causes of children living in the street, since these are the focus on the RLP project. The intent was to help SC-GFO to better address these causes and thereby reduce the number of street children. The second aim was to provide preliminary data to develop instruments to assess these issues, as well as child, family and community function. The latter aim was part of a proposed initiative by DCOF to better assess the impact of DCOF-supported programs in Georgia and other countries.

The assessment consisted of two parallel qualitative studies of street children and affected persons. One assessment was conducted by faculty at BU, using methods developed through their work in other countries. The second assessment would be conducted by faculty at CU. Both studies included an investigation of what causes children to live in the streets. At the end of both studies these results would be compared to determine if the resulting data provided a consistent picture. The BU assessment also investigated local perceptions of what constitutes good function in children, families and the community. This information will subsequently be used to develop the instruments described above.

Qualitative Methodology and Process

Qualitative assessment refers to methods such as interviewing people using questions which are open-ended and non-leading, and where the interviewees' comments are recorded verbatim. The objective is to encourage interviewees to say what they really think about a topic and record this accurately. Beginning with this type of approach is particularly important with children who may be more susceptible to leading interviews (such as from journalists or other persons with a particular agenda) and have learned to respond on the basis of what they think the person expects to hear.

Two qualitative methods were used in our visit in July, 2005: Free Listing and Key Informant Interviews. In the Free Listing interviews, children aged 8-17 who participate in the Rebuilding Lives Project at Sparrows and Rainbow Centers in Tbilisi and Biliki Center in Gori were asked four different questions. As per SC-GFO, a major focus of the qualitative assessment was on the causes of children being on the street. Free lists were conducted asking this question as well as the characteristics of a well-functioning individual child, a family, and a community. Specifically:

² This assessment was conducted by the Center for International Health and Development (CIHD) of the Boston University School of Public Health in collaboration with Save the Children/Georgia Field Office (SC-GFO). Funding was supplied through the Displaced Children's and Orphans Fund (DCOF) at USAID, with additional support from SC-GFO.

- 1) What are the causes of children going to the street?
- 2) What does a happy child look like?
- 3) What does a happy family look like?
- 4) What does a happy community look like?

The questions were stated broadly to encourage a wide variety of responses. From these lists, topics or issues of particular interest to the program were selected and these became the basis for Key Informant interviews. BU staff together with Save the Children/Georgia Field Office and the RLP Coordinator determined the Key Informant Questions based on response prevalence, interests and resources. Key informants (KIs), or persons from the community who are knowledgeable about the issues of children living in the street, were identified by the children who participated in the Free Listing interviews. In KI interviews, identified persons are interviewed in depth to gain as much local insight as possible.

Results

Free Listing Interviews

During the trip in July, 2005, Phase I: Qualitative Assessment of Children Living on the Street was completed. A total of ten interviewers were trained in qualitative methods of interviewing and data analysis. Three trainees were enlisted from local graduate students in the social sciences; seven trainees were employees of local partners providing assistance to street children. Many of the interviewers have a social science background and have had experience with children living on the street.

Tbilisi Free List Data:

The trained interviewers conducted 43 free list interviews among children visiting two centers for street children in Tbilisi – the ‘Rainbow’ and ‘Sparrow’ Centers.

1. What are the causes of Street Children?	Number Reporting	Percentage
They can't afford	34	79%
Because of disagreement at home	13	30%
Are orphans	12	28%
Parents are drunkards	12	28%
Lack care	9	21%
Were thrown out of...	9	21%
When they quarrel with children	9	21%
They have no shelter (homeless)	8	18%
Parents force them to make money	8	18%
Beat (parents)	7	16%
Freedom	6	14%
Are afraid of coming home	5	12%
Parents can't understand children	5	12%
Interest in street	5	12%
Have sick/ill parents (beat them)	4	9%
They have no patron	4	9%
Meet friends in order not to be alone in the street	4	9%
Street life becomes a custom/habit	4	9%

For stealing	4	9 %
Because of punishment (street attracted)	4	9 %
Beggary	4	9%

2. What is a happy child like?	Number Reporting	Percentage
They are social and economically satisfied: 1. Have parents, 2. Friends, his/her needs satisfied, 3. Dresses, gifts, books, computer	28	65%
Is obedient	23	53%
Is very positive, happy cheer full	10	23%
He studies well	10	23%
He is communicable – has wish to have many friends	9	21%
Don't beggin	7	16%
Helps other poor people	7	16%
Is playing	7	16%
Is happy because of happiness	5	12%
Polite, says no bad words	5	12%
They are not running from home	5	12%
Is smiling	5	12%
Is happy because of everything around him	4	9%
Are snobby, aren't friendly with poors	4	9%
Are free, and cheerful	4	9%
Is kind	4	9%
Takes care of parents	4	9%

3. What does a happy family look like?	Number Reporting	Percentage
Don't argue	21	49%
When they love	14	33%
When parents have a job	10	23%
Financial well-being	9	21%
Respect	8	19%
When they smile sometimes	7	16%
When family members treat each other good	7	16%
Wish fulfillment	6	14%
When they are all members in the family	6	14%
Friendly	6	14%
When they help poor people	6	14%
Parents feel comfortable with each other	5	12%
When they are all alive	5	12%
They have a good bringing up	5	12%
Good family situation	5	12%
Don't let child beg for money	4	9%
Takes no alcohol	4	9%
Have child	4	9%

4. What is a good community like?	Number Reporting	Percentage
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Help or assistance	16	37%
Help us when in need	11	25%
Are kind	9	21%
Esteem you/ respect you	8	19%
When they don't quarrel with each other	8	19%
They are not only neighbors but also friends	6	14%
Treat you good	6	14%
Can understand you	5	12%
Caring	5	12%
Love each other	5	12%
Are together and have contact	4	9%
Support and compassion	4	9%
Trust	4	9%
When they are good neighbors	4	9%

Summary of Tbilisi Free List Data

Review of the free listing results from the three function-related questions produced a thorough description of a healthy child, family and community. The overlap across these areas was high, with many naming lack of fighting or quarreling, kindness to others, happiness, respectfulness, and loving and caring as important characteristics of a well-functioning child, family and community (Tables 2-4). Family members 'treating each other well' was also raised by a high number of interviewees. In addition, all three categories were considered well-functioning in the presence of good economic conditions (i.e. employment, food, toys).

Review and analysis of the 'Causes' free listing results yielded two main categories of causes of children going to the street, namely (1) causes related to family issues that push children into the streets, and (2) causes related to factors operating in the street that tend to keep them there (See Table 1). The 'family' issues include poverty and unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, poor family relations, and changes in the makeup of the family (such as a new partner of the parent). The issues related to maintaining children on the streets include the formation of friendships, discovery of ways to make money (such as begging or stealing), and development of 'habits' related to street-life, such as being accustomed to hang around certain places.

Gori Free List Data

Once these interviews were completed in Tbilisi, the identical process took place in Gori at the Biliki Centre. The same free listing questions were used and data analyzed. The Biliki Center had a smaller population of children to be interviewed; therefore, we interviewed 16 children for free listing.

1. What are the causes of children going to the street?	Number Reporting	Percentage
Economic hardship	15	94%
Is an orphan	10	62%
Parents' alcoholism	8	50%
Father and mother fight	7	44%
Parent forces them	7	44%
Lack of guardian	5	31%

Pride (a. parents insult child's pride, b. mentality of the street, authority)	5	31%
Beating	4	25%
don't have a house	4	25%
Junkie parents	4	25%
Lack of parental attention	4	25%
Parents' unemployment	3	19%
Blackmail, from other people (strangers), from street children)	3	19%

2. What is a happy child like?

	<u>Number Reporting</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Can do everything he/she wants (can afford it, they make his/her wishes come true)	15	94%
Plays games, has fun, goes to cinema, theatre, discos	13	81%
Is cheerful, is having fun	8	50%
Studies well	8	50%
Does not have to go to the street for clothes, food, money	8	50%
Tries to make others happy	7	44%
Is proud	6	37%
Is not rude (is polite)	6	37%
Is brave, communicative	6	37%
Is obedient	6	37%
Does everything in order to be happier	4	25%
Loves everybody	4	25%
Has many friends	4	25%

3. What does a happy family look like?

	<u>Number Reporting</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
There is no conflict at home	11	69%
Are rich	9	56%
Are healthy	7	44%
They take care of each other	7	44%
Everybody loves each other equally	5	31%
Have a job with good income	4	25%
Have diverse life (walk, restaurants)	4	25%
They are not alcoholics	4	25%
When all the family members are alive	3	19%
Are cheerful	3	19%
Friendly relations (understanding, advice, they ask each other)	3	19%
They have a wide circle of friends	3	19%
They are religious	3	19%
When they have a child	3	19%

4. What is a good community like?

	<u>Number Reporting</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Are attentive	10	62%
A neighbor you can trust	9	56%
Are friends to each other	8	50%
There is no fighting	7	44%

Are not arrogant to be friends with the poor	7	44%
Love	3	19%
Devoted	3	19%
When a neighbor asks you something and you give	3	19%
When they do good kind things	3	19%

Summary of Gori Free List Data:

Free listing results from Gori-Biliki Center demonstrated very similar patterns of priorities to the Tbilisi population, both in causes and functioning. Free listing descriptions of a healthy child, family and community also had high overlap naming lack of conflict, taking care of each other, happiness, loving, and having a good income.

The Gori Causes free lists reported very similar items as factors pushing them to be in the streets including economic hardship, parental fighting or alcohol abuse, lack of attention, or physical abuse. One different that emerged is that these results did not include as many factors related to pulling or keeping children in the street, such as “freedom” or “interest in the street”. In addition, the language used in Gori was slightly different and described by our interviewers as more “advanced”.

Key Informant Interviews

Based on the findings from free listing interviews and discussions with RLP staff, five topics were identified to be further investigated using key informant interviews. Due to the similarities of free listing responses, the same Key Informant question topics from Tbilisi were used to gain further insight and confirm these original results in Gori. These topics included:

- a) Fighting/Quarrelling
- b) Beating
- c) Alcohol and/or Drug Use/Abuse
- d) Relationships of Friends
- e) Family Relationships

Tbilisi and Gori Key Informant Data:

In Tbilisi, 17 Key Informants (KIs) were identified and interviewed; ten interviewees were spoken to twice. In Gori, 12 Key Informants were identified and interviewed in Gori, all confirming the findings in Tbilisi. These interviews provided more insight into the individual topics.

A. Name of cause: Fighting

Description

- Described as occurring between mother and father, between parent and child, or grandparents.
- Can take the form of threatening, physically beating, or belittling each other in front of the child.

- Causes of fighting within the family included parents punishing without reason, bad relationships, father or mother drinking alcohol, lover, toxicomania (sniffing glue, smoking, other substances) by parent or child, child not able to earn enough money for family, child misbehaving (e.g., stealing objects from home), parent with psychological problems, poor families – no money for food, children wanting independence/freedom, and when the mother is a whore
- Fighting negatively affects the child, and the children also learn to fight from their parents.

B. Name of cause: Beating

Description

- Described as occurring between the parents, between parent and child, or between siblings
- Causes of beating was described as parents not liking the child's behavior, as a way to get the child to bring home more money, when/if the child fights back, if the child steals, parent does not know how to treat a child, parent's use drugs or alcohol, unstable family situation, father being upset with someone else and taking it out on his child, a lover, and economic need (e.g., thinking about money for bread).
- Also described as a group beating up an individual if one child cause any problems on the street.
- The effects of being beaten were described as a child being humiliated and turning to the street

C. Name of cause: Alcohol/Drug Abuse

Description

- Described as a situation where an individual tastes it and gets addicted, has physiologic dependence (addiction)
- Causes of alcohol or drug abuse were discussed as coming from a family situation and through peer relationships.
 - Causes that were described within a family included using them to get rid of problems, to be in good mood, lack of attention from parents, in order to forget the cold or their worries, being ashamed or fed up with having drunk or drug-addicted parents, unemployment of parents, conflict in the family, and the child simply imitating the parent's use of alcohol or drugs.
 - Causes that were discussed in the context of friendships were imitating friends, to be in with a circle of friends, trying to prove to their friends they are cool guys, interest or curiosity in drugs/alcohol, ability to use drugs freely.
- Effects of drug and alcohol abuse on a child can lead to aggression, imitating their parent's use of alcohol/drugs, or parents forcing the child to bring home money

D. Name of cause: Family Relationships

Description

- Poor family relations as a reason for children going to the street are described as no friendly relationships between parents and children, constant conflict & beating between parents, when a parent beats the child, when a child receives no attention, when parents' think only of their own happiness, when a parent prostitutes

- Good family relations were described as having family warmth
- KIs talked about the causes of poor family relations including economic vulnerability, unemployment, drug addicted or drunkard parents, strict or volatile parents, parents who ignore the requirements of the child, a parent has a lover, a parent sells the child or forces them to get money,

E. Name of cause: Friendships

Description

- Friendships were described as people that have common problems and make decisions together, collaborate, care for each other, help each other, are devoted, share things equally (even drug addictions), attracted to common adventures, and are stable and will not betray you.
- Characteristics of friendships that contribute to children going to the street included the ability to get compassion, as a remedy for a child's loneliness, an interest in children who live on the street, or wanting to be "a cool guy".
- Some negative effects of friendships on a child consist of a child stealing in order to help a friend, not caring for their parents because of friends, being forced to steal, smoke cigarettes, drink or use drugs, and ending up in a bad group of friends.

Summary of Key Informant Results

Under fighting and beating, KIs discussed domestic violence between parents and physical abuse parent-to-child as affecting the children going to the street. Results showed that most believed the family had the largest impact on how a child ended up (e.g., if a parent was an alcoholic, they would become one; if parents fought, children became aggressive). Family relationships clearly influenced a child's decision to live on the street with KIs describing "lack of friendly relationships between parent and child" as a cause to go to the street. In addition, KIs noted that parents may force a child to beg in the street and that children may leave home to avoid this job assignment.

Alcohol and drug abuse were described as both a cause of children going to the street and an outcome of children who live in the street. As a cause of going to the street, several key informants noted that alcohol and drug abuse by the parents pushed children to the street. This insight was usually linked to violence in the home. In addition, some key informants discussed that children are embarrassed by his parent's addiction or the children themselves have become addicted and are forced to leave the home. As an outcome, key informants explained that some children taste it and become addicted or imitate family or friends.

It should be mentioned that although only 3 KI interviewees noted sexual abuse/violence as a cause of children going to the street, interviewers felt that this may have been under-reported. This topic was only brought up in the second interviews after a certain level of rapport and trust had been built. Interviewers felt that if more time could have been available to develop a strong relationship between interviewer and interviewee, it is possible that sexual violence may have been discussed more often. This is consistent with our experience in many other settings wherein sensitive topics are avoided unless specifically raised, or significant rapport is built.

Although some KIs discussed a role of friendships (e.g. “charm of socializing”) among the causes of children going to the street, the majority of children discussed the important characteristics of friendships once children were spending time or living on the street. Several KIs described in depth how friendships on the street quickly become their family system, and one that is “better” than their biological family. For example, many KIs explained how everything is shared equally among children living in the street and everyone helps each other. Some of the KIs specifically described these friendships of children on the street as “stronger than other friendships” and “devoted”.

Finally, there was significant overlap among the six topic areas in both Tbilisi and Gori, with multiple inter-connections and cycles described. For example, a KI would describe how parents would begin abusing alcohol which would lead to fighting and beating between the parents and with their children. They explained that this, in turn, would often lead to a child spending a lot of time on the street, meeting friends with similar problems, and learning ways to make money. Some of these children would then become involved in glue-sniffing or drinking.

Summary of Results for Assessment I:

Street children and other knowledgeable people in Tbilisi and Gori have a similar perspective on the causes of street children. In both cities, the perception is of two broad inter-related categories of issues: 1) family-related issues associated with poverty and social problems such as fighting and beating, alcoholism, and poor family relations that push and keep children in the streets; and 2) social issues related to street life that lure them to and keep them in the streets once they are there. This assessment allowed a closer examination of how these children describe the escalating pattern of family problems that often lead children to spend time in the street, and how they link different social problems together. Understanding these patterns is useful to guide our recommendations regarding possibly effective interventions. These recommendations are outlined below following the presentation of Assessment II, titled “Assessment: Next Steps”.

Assessment II³

The goal of this assessment is to enrich and strengthen the Rebuilding Lives Project (RLP) of Save the Children Georgia Field Office. This assessment aims to strengthen the evidence base by taking a narrative approach that documents more fully children's understanding of why they are on the streets, what would enable them to live at home and continue their education, what subjective changes inform their decisions to reintegrate with their families or to reengage in education, and what benefits they see the project as having provided. This narrative approach is well suited to the longitudinal tracking of particular children, providing an idiographic analysis that complements the nomothetic analysis offered by the BU team. Also, the narrative approach is useful in bringing forward the voices of young people who have lived on the margins of society, identifying individual differences, and illuminating how children's perspectives differ from those of adults.

Method

The assessment was conducted as a partnership between the Center for Social Sciences, the RLP, and DCOF. The Center for Social Sciences was selected because of its graduate training in psychometrics, its keen interest in social issues, and its willingness to collaborate with Save the Children Georgia Field Office in addressing key social problems facing Georgia. The partnership between an academic partner and a practitioner partner offered the opportunity to build local capacities for measurement and impact evaluation studies and to enable ongoing collaboration. The Center for Social Sciences provided four female Georgian graduate students who, following training by the author and Save the Children local partners, served as the primary data collectors. The data were collected July 1 – 24, 2005.

Sites

Data were collected in both Tbilisi and Rustavi. Tbilisi was an important focus because it is the capital city, home to significant numbers of children who are on or of the streets, and the place where the RLP began. The Tbilisi area offers access to children who are at different points along the continuum that begins with leaving the home and ends with reentering the family or returning to school or a vocation. Rustavi was selected as a site because it has a different sub-group of children, including a greater number of children who live on the streets. Most of the Rustavi children live in extreme poverty and do not attend school. At the time when the data were collected, the RLP had worked in Rustavi for only five weeks by means of a mobile team that reached out to children on or of the street and a recently established Center. It was hoped that the assessment would strengthen the base of knowledge about the children, enabling more effective outreach to and support for the children.

Participants

In Tbilisi, the participants in individual interviews were two girls and three boys between the ages of 13 and 15 years. Four of the children have lived in the Sparrows Center for several months, while one boy goes to Sparrows only as a day center. In addition, three focus group

³ This assessment, led by Michael Wessells of Columbia University, was supported by USAID/DCOF and also the USAID Mission in Tbilisi. The views presented are those of the author, not of USAID.

discussions (FGDs) were conducted. One consisted of four family members (two mothers, one father, and one aunt) of the children who lived in Sparrows. A second consisted of staff members of Child and Environment, the local implementing partner in the RLP. The third was a focus group with “other children,” that is, children who were not associated with the RLP and who lived at home. This group included seven teenagers, three of whom were girls.

In Rustavi, the individually interviewed participants were three girls, two of whom were sisters, and three boys between the ages of thirteen and seventeen years. All of these children had participated in the RLP since June, 2005. Although the three girls did not live on the streets at the time of the interviews, they had lived on the street in the past and currently lived in poverty. The boys were children of the streets in that they spent most of their time, including at night, on the street. Also, individual interviews were conducted with the mothers of three of the boys. Three FGDs were conducted. One was with Rustavi staff including two psychologists, two teachers, a social worker, and a project coordinator. A second was with “other children” who included three girls and three boys between thirteen and seventeen years from ordinary families. The third was with community members, who included three men and three women, all of whom were well educated professionals.

Preparation

Since the four students had some background in narrative methods, a two-day workshop was conducted in preparation for the interviews. Among the topics discussed were the situation of children in and of the street, the RLP project, ethical considerations (including informed consent and confidentiality), narrative methodology, relationship building with the children, the questions that the assessment aims to address, and role plays regarding how to probe for information and the best way to ask questions and interact with children.

A key part of the workshop was discussion with staff members from the local partners who implement the RLP in Tbilisi and Rustavi, respectively. The staff members advised on all aspects of the interview process, alerted the group to issues or ways of talking that could be damaging (including use of the stigmatizing label “street children”), and also helped to shape the questions themselves. The staff selected the child participants according to criteria such as gender balance, diversity of the children’s situation, and the likely willingness of children to talk without experiencing adverse effects. Since many children in and of the streets have significant issues of trust, the staff advised that the student interviewers should have two meetings with each prospective interviewee. The first, a two-hour meeting, would be a “getting to know you” outing to a local park that provided the opportunity to build trust, explain the aims of the assessment project, and ask whether the youth wanted to participate. The second meeting would be the interview, assuming the child was willing to participate.

In regard to the children of or on the streets, the questions that the project aimed to answer fall into numerous categories, sample questions for which are outlined below.

History: How old are you? How did you come to spend time on the streets?

Current Situation: What are your biggest concerns right now? How do you get food? Where do you sleep at night?

Family Relations: Who are your family members? Where do you prefer to be—on the street or at home? Why?

Personal Growth: How would friends and other people your age describe you? What is most important to you?

Peer and Community Relations: Who are your friends and how do you choose them? Where do you spend your time? Why?

Future: How do you see your future? Where would you like to live? Why?

Individual interviews with children in the RLP

The students worked in pairs, enabling one to focus on interacting with the participant while the other took detailed, written notes. Audio or video recording of the interviews were avoided because they can arouse fear or disclose confidential information if they fall into the wrong hands. To protect confidentiality, the written notes deleted names or other details that could be used to identify individual children. Care was taken before and during the individual interviews with children to let them know that they were free to not answer any question or to end the interview at any time. In Tbilisi, the interviewers followed the plan of having a “getting to know you” meeting with the children a day in advance of the interview. In Rustavi, this proved to be impossible as the Rustavi staff called on the day of the first meeting to say that the children would not be available subsequently that week. Since the staff said the children were willing to talk that same day with the interviewers, a decision was made to follow a brief warm-up discussion with the interview that day.

The assessment plan had called initially for the use of semi-structured interviews. However, the initial meeting with the participants revealed that some children had short attention spans and talked most openly when the discussion followed the flow established by the children. Also, the use of a question and answer format raised concerns that the children would withdraw from what they perceived to be a formal interview. Wanting to reduce these problems and capitalize on the age proximity of the participants and the students, the student team decided to explore items such as the above in the context of a free-flowing discussion. Most discussions lasted sixty to ninety minutes and were conducted in private in a meeting room in Beghurabi or Rustavi. At the beginning of each day, the student team met with the CU faculty member or staff members of SC-GFO to review the findings, monitor the process, and plan the remaining work.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussions with Others

The assessment aimed to unearth differences in perspective on questions such as why children go to the streets. If, for example, parents and children on or of the streets have a different understanding of why children go to the streets, this may have significant implications for family reintegration. Similarly, the assessment aimed to illuminate how other community adults and children viewed the children who are on or of the streets since these views, too, have implications for reintegration or problems achieving reintegration. For these reasons, the assessment included individual interviews with a parent or family members of several Rustavi children in the RLP and FGDs with other adults, other children, or RLP local staff.

The individual interviews with parents in Rustavi, which took place in most cases in the parents' homes, asked questions about how the child relates to brothers and sisters, why the child went to the streets, which family members have jobs, whether there are neighbors or others who help support the family, whether changes in the child have occurred during the period of contact with the RLP, and what the parent would like to see in the future. These same questions were explored in the FGD conducted with parents in Tbilisi.

In both Tbilisi and Rustavi, the FGDs with other adults explored questions such as why some children live on the streets or spend most of their time on the streets, what are the relations between community members and children on the streets, whether there are community supports for the children, and what supports there should be for the children. Similar questions were probed in the FGDs with other children, though these FGDs explored also whether children who live at home and go to school would engage with children on the street in activities such as having a conversation, having lunch together, going to a movie together, or bringing the child on the streets home for lunch.

In both Tbilisi and Rustavi, the FGD with staff members explored questions such as why do children go to the streets, how do children come to the center or the RLP mobile team (Rustavi), have changes occurred in children's attitudes and behavior following their engagement with the RLP, have specific activities or areas of work benefited the children, and how do others outside the center see the children.

Results and Discussion

Because of the differences in the populations of children and also the RLP interventions in the two assessment sites, the main results from Tbilisi and Rustavi are presented separately below.

Tbilisi

Family Relationships. In the children's narratives, relational problems in families were conspicuous and in some cases played a role in the children's decisions to go to the streets. Key among the problems of family relations is abusive treatment by family members. For example, a girl from Tbilisi said,

I call my stepmother Cruella, from [the movie] "101 Dalmations." At first I had good relationships with her; we used to go for a walk together. But then if you make her angry once, the relationship gets worse. I left on 20th January. I dressed up, and went to my classmate, I called the patrol Police and they took me here. My brother started crying as he didn't want to stay with Cruella, and he came with me also... I don't want to go back home. Well, I want, but I won't go....

This girl reported also that although she loved her father, she would not go back to him due to her bad relations with her stepmother. Of the last visit of her stepmother to see her in the Center, she said, "She was telling me to go back home, but I knew that she would spank me as soon as we were at home and that's why I didn't go."

In some cases the family abuse involved older siblings. For example, a fourteen-year-old boy who had lived with his grandmother together with his three older brothers said that one of his older brothers forced him to go to the streets to sell things and to bring the money back to him. “He was telling me to sell flowers. When I wouldn’t bring money he would yell at me, beat me.” Asked when he ran away how he came to the Center, he said “I was on the street for two days, in the second-hand clothes shop, sitting on the stairs. The woman who worked in the shop took me here.”

For many children on the streets, problems of family relationships are grounded in issues of family disintegration or reorganization. For the first girl described above, her family problems related to her broken family and her poor relationship with her father’s new wife. The boy just described had lost first his father and then his mother, forcing him to live with his grandmother. Of the five child interviewees, three had lost one parent, one had lost both parents, three had parents who are married a second time, and some of them have step-brothers or step-sisters as a result of the second marriage. In some cases, the problems of family relations concerned parental fighting, which can be highly disturbing for children. Asked why her parents divorced, a fifteen-year-old girl said

I don’t know. They used to have arguments sometimes. My father used to come home for a day, and then he used to be away for months. My mother used to phone his mother in [city name] but he wasn’t there either. She was fighting with him, scolding him about where he was going to.

These observations support the results of the Assessment I showing that family problems figure prominently in children’s decisions to leave home.

Family Members’ Perspectives on Why Children Go To the Streets

A valuable but worrying observation is the gap that exists between children and their family members in regard to their understandings of why children go to streets. As reported in Assessment I, children’s most frequently cited causes of going to the streets relate to family issues such as poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, poor family relations, and changes in the makeup of the family. As noted above, the narratives from interviews with individual children emphasized the impact of negative family relations. Although children also cited the “pull” factors that lured them to the streets and kept them there, they cited these factors less frequently.

The FGD conducted with family members, however, revealed that family members have a somewhat different emphasis on poverty, children’s characteristics, and the lure of the streets. The following excerpt is from the initial responses to the question “What do you think can be a reason why a child goes to the street.”

Some of them don’t want a family at all. They like when they are free, and no one controls them.

There’s where all the troubles come from they end up in the jail.

Some of them go to the street because they need freedom; no one punishes them there. They do whatever they want.

But sometimes people blame the children when they are not to blame.

It is the children's fault and is not at the same time. Some of the children have no food, some have conflicts with their parents, some of the children have stepmothers and cannot have good relationships with them. The children are not being paid attention to and the psychic of a child changes. One shouldn't make a child leave.

But the main reason is still poverty.

Later in the FGD, the respondents reiterated the importance of poverty.

If I had 100 Lari a day, or 50, that would be a good family. Money is everything in our times.

No matter how good the relationships in a family are, you can never be happy when a child tells you that he/she is hungry.

I haven't seen my children's mother since my child was two. She [the daughter] was in one of the orphanages, and then she was with me for a few years. When you have no money you have to take them here.

... Now I work on cleaning windows. I took home five Lari yesterday. My children need so many things that I don't know how to divide that money. My child needed a medicine that costs 6 Lari. What should I have done: Should I have brought the medicine or should I have bought food?

The latter statements indicate the negative impact that poverty has on the quality of Georgian family life and the anguish and ethical dilemmas experienced by impoverished parents who want to support their children but who are unable to fill their parental role of caring properly for their children.

This discussion indicates parents' relative silence regarding troubled family relationships as a cause of children's going to the streets and their emphases on poverty, children's characteristics, and pull factors such as the freedom associated with life on the streets. Family members did refer to the importance of bad relationships in the family, as one put it eloquently in saying

No, even the rich cry. It's not about money only. There has to be harmony between parents; they should not quarrel because it affects their child.

In this respect, parents and their children say similar things but emphasize different factors. In particular, the issue of bad relationships was far less prominent in the family members' narratives than in children's narratives. The family members' emphases on poverty and the lure of the streets may be a convenient means through which parents and family members rationalize their children's departure, deflect criticism, and avoid responsibility for having negative family relationships that children seek to escape. To some extent, it may also be a presentational strategy that enables family members to avoid appearing in a bad light in front of well educated students from a prestigious academic Center. However, one should also consider the possibility that the family members actually believe that children's decisions to go to the street are based more on poverty, children's characteristics, and the lure of the streets than on the quality of the

relationships within the children's families. If the latter possibility were accurate, it would suggest the need for greater attention on improving relations in the family as part of efforts to achieve reintegration.

Consistent with their view of poverty as one of the main reasons why children go to the streets, the family members wanted the children to receive vocational training at the Center on skills such as hairdressing, fashion designing, and sewing for girls and carpentry, automobile repair, and "working on computers" for boys. Two parents suggested that if they were provided with the appropriate tools, they would be willing to teach their skills to children at the Center. In light of the importance of poverty as a cause of children going to the streets, a useful option might be to have selected parents train various children and also work with other parents, thereby building support networks with other households, making the reduction of household poverty a family initiative, and avoiding inadvertent privileging of at-risk children.

Personal Characteristics

To describe the children's personal characteristics is inherently difficult because there may be different sub-groups of children. According to the Tbilisi staff, some children go the streets because of difficult family situations, whereas others are "wanderers" who go to the streets even if their family situations are favorable. The staff also hypothesized that there is a small subgroup of those who are potential criminals and who see the streets as places of opportunity for criminal activity. At present, there are few hard data that define the sub-categories of children on the street or indicate the size of various subgroups.

Despite many negative media portrayals of children who are on or of the streets, the children themselves display numerous positive qualities and values. The RLP staff members commented that the children have good communication skills and have much more life experience than other children their age. The children love to play, obtain new information, and do math. They are particularly good at counting money, an essential skill for people on the streets.

Whereas one might have expected the desperation and competition inherent in life on the streets to breed selfishness, the children exhibit significant levels of care for others. Asked what she would do if she could change her life, one girl said

I would wish only one thing: I would help the beggars. The second wish is to have a mother, to find my mother.

This girl's compassion for others in need indicates her capacity to empathize and her desire to end human suffering. Her wish to have a mother resonates with the wish of most normal children to have a loving family. Since many children on the streets have either left or distanced themselves from their biological families, they typically form strong bonds with peers, who become something of a surrogate family. With their friends, they spend time together, tell stories, joke around, and visit favorite places. The children display a keen concern for their friends and take pride in helping their friends by, for example, loaning them money when they have an unpaid debt.

Understandably, trust is a major issue for many children. Although the five children have friends, they have few close friends. The main criterion used by three of the children for selecting close friends is their trustworthiness. As one girl said,

A friend is whom you love, whom you tell a secret and he/she won't disclose it.... I observe first. I tell her something, if she tells it to someone, she is not reliable; if not, she is reliable. Whoever keeps my secret, loves me, and is ready to be my close friend, I chose her as a friend.

Boys, too, reported that they used a similar procedure to screen prospective friends. Only one of the children, a boy, currently has a girlfriend. Although it is valuable to avoid reading too much into this fact, it may be an aftereffect of exposure to the damaging relations witnessed among their parents and family members.

Among their more challenging personal characteristics the children exhibit are the hyperactivity, poor concentration, excessive curiosity, poor memory, problems in mental and physical development, high level of anxiety, and paucity of spheres of interest that staff witness on the children's entry to the Center. For some children, these problems relate to glue sniffing, a practice that is relatively widespread among children on the street. Related problems evident in some children are poor impulse control and skills of anger management. According to one girl,

Sometimes I am aggressive. I get angry about minor things. I want to break something or do something when I am like that. I don't swear, but sometimes I say impolite words such as "rotten."

Asked "How do others characterize you?" she replied:

They say that I am angry and like that. I became something different recently; I wasn't like that before. Now I get angry, fight, and shout all the time.

Since her propensity to get angry and to fight makes for a potentially explosive relation and could impede family reintegration, anger control and training in nonviolent conflict management may be productive areas for program development, a point that is returned to below.

Community Relations

All the children reported that they have good relationships with the community. As said by one child who had been treated well by two famous Georgians, "I love everybody who treats me well." At the same time he reported having been mistreated in the past: "Some of them were saying 'go and work; you are a man.' Some of them were swearing". The same child had been physically abused by policemen and taken to an orphanage against his will and without his consent. Other children noted unanimously that they have good relationships with their neighbours, teachers, and classmates.

A key finding from the FGD with community children, however, is that children on or of the streets are stigmatized by the community as being rude, bad, mentally underdeveloped, or unintelligent. One participant even suggested that some Georgians see children on the streets as

mentally ill. Although several children expressed a willingness to interact with or to befriend children on the streets, all the respondents agreed that their parents would disapprove of their children interacting with the children who are on the streets. Here again, the difference in perspective between children and adults is conspicuous. This problem of stigmatization poses a major obstacle for reintegration and warrants considerable program attention, a point that is elaborated on subsequently.

On a positive note, the FGC with community children revealed relatively high levels of empathy and care for children on the streets. Citing parents as the main reason why children leave families and go to the streets, the respondents noted that parents are responsible for child abuse, destructive conflict between the parents, forcing children to beg in the streets, and economic problems in the family. The respondents identified the following as problems with living in the streets: health problems (including HIV/AIDS and diseases related to inadequate living conditions), psychological traumas, and problems with law enforcement institutions, including mistreatment by police and placement in jail or juvenile detention facilities. The respondents agreed that it is harder for girls than for boys to survive in the streets. To address these issues, the respondents called for the creation of institutions that would provide children with good education, care and emotional support, vocational education, and employment opportunities. The empathy and concern of these “other children” suggests that properly sensitized, community children are a valuable resource for supporting children on the streets and for nurturing the formation of alternate peer groups that will aid reintegration.

Program Impact

Although the RLP is in its early stages, tangible impacts and benefits to children in Tbilisi are already visible. A very hopeful sign is that the parents of the children readily point out how their children have changed in positive ways as a result of coming to the Center. Two examples are as follows.

My son was outside, but he was in internet-café's all time, he wouldn't go around with bad boys. He didn't care about anything but computers. I know for sure that he was there. They wouldn't let him go at first but then I went there and I promised them that he wouldn't behave himself wildly. He has changed very much since he started to come here; his character has changed. He used to be aggressive before, but now he spends all day here (*in “Beghurebi”*), then he comes home; sometimes he comes to see me at work. I am very happy that he is here. He tells me why didn't I take him here before.

... My sons had been living with their father for five years and they changed a lot. They were not like that with me. Their father used to drink all the time. They absolutely changed after coming here. The teachers [Center staff] commend them all the time. They learned to be friendly; they help each other. They were so out of control that I was afraid if I could ever regain control over them...

These parents' reflections on their children's positive development at the Center are echoed by the children themselves. One boy who said he had been addicted to computers before coming to the Center reported that he has escaped his addiction. Another boy said that he is not in the street and feels safe in the Center. One girl reported:

I got wiser, I got more experienced. When I was at home, I did not have enough time for assessment. I had to take care of my brother.

The positive impacts of the RLP are also illustrated in the following case assessment.

M., a 15-year-old girl, lived with her mother until her mother died of tuberculosis in December, 2003. Although M. had had problems with her mother, she remained close to her and worked at a bakery while she was alive. M.'s father has another family and wants nothing to do with M. Since M.'s aunt also does not want her, M. has lived at the Center since her mother died.

When the RLP staff first met M., she gave the impression that she was balanced and quiet. However, on closer observation, she seemed underdeveloped, even slightly mentally retarded. M. expressed suicidal thoughts and was quite emotional. Often she asked the staff what would happen if she took many pills. The psychologist indicated that M. constantly looked to her for emotional support, particularly since M. was grieving her mother's death.

M. had good relations with the other girls at the Center. Since she was reliable, the other girls trusted her with their secrets. M. often tried to imitate some of the more advanced children's vocabulary and became frustrated when she was unable to do it. Although M. was never in conflict with other people, she could be aggressive toward herself. The staff report that she tries to be perfect and when she succeeds in doing something well she gets excited and is slightly awkward.

At the Center, M. participates in a program that teaches children how to express their emotions. When the staff encouraged M. to write letters to her (deceased) mother, she began writing stories about a girl whose mother had died. Since the stories are nearly identical to her reality, she is able to use her stories to express her inner feelings and thoughts.

M. looks forward to seeing the psychologist to share her stories. She has become more optimistic, as illustrated in her stories. For example, the girl in the story is not alone, has people that love her, and has her mother's spirit always around her. The girl in the story also becomes better following the death of her mother. Although she still tries to live up to her mother's rules and lessons, she expresses herself more and is more involved in group discussions.

The staff have observed significant improvement in M.'s emotional well-being and cognitive development. They see her opportunity to interact with other children and to participate in a variety of activities (e.g., the program that teaches children how to express their emotions, singing) as having increased her ability to express her opinion and work through some of her emotional problems, enabling her to grieve and come to terms with her mother's death.

Although M. has no biological family to integrate into, the staff are exploring the option of foster care. She will continue to attend school when the term begins. M.'s hope for the future resonates in her recent comment on what has changed:

"I wasn't doing anything bad even before, but I am going towards good now."

Collectively, these reports from children, family members, and staff suggest that the RLP project has achieved high levels of trust and respect among the populations it serves, is making a tangible, positive difference in the lives of the children, and is on its way toward achieving appropriate levels of impact.

Rustavi

Family relationships

The interviewed children come from difficult family situations and live in extreme poverty. Three of the interviewed children have parents who have divorced, and the fathers of two boys have died. The children have a wide range of living situations, all of which present significant challenges. One boy lives in a dormitory room with his elder brother and his mother, who is paralyzed and unable to support the family. Another boy lives on a farm where his mother works and lives in the same room with her and her boyfriend. Two sisters have left their parents and live with their elder sister and her husband in a rented apartment. Another girl lives in a dormitory with her mother who lacks permanent employment but takes on temporary jobs.

As was true of the children from Tbilisi, the children from Rustavi spoke passionately about the troubled relations in their families. One girl whose parents had divorced and whose mother had remarried but lived occasionally with her former husband, said of her parents,

Both of them are bad. My father drinks. My parents make a bad reputation for me. My mother also drinks and they usually fight. Sometimes I meet my mother and father, but I don't talk to them. If they say something to me, I will slap them. Yesterday my stepfather and my father had a fight. My stepfather hit an axe on my father's arm and cut his fingers.

Another girl, angry over her abandonment, said of her father,

I don't love my father at all. He left me when I was only months old. I was eight years old when he saw me for the first time. I didn't even know that he was my father. Now he has another wife and children.

One boy's anger toward his father was so great that he expressed a willingness to beat him. In a discussion of smoking, which is common among street children, the boy was asked whether his parents forbid smoking. He replied

They forbid but I still smoke. If my father touches me, I'll beat him. Once he came drunk, and started saying things to me, then I hit him in the stomach with my leg, and he doesn't dare to say anything to me after that.

These narratives, which give testimony to the troubled relations that exist in the families of many Georgian children who are on the streets, suggest that the improvement of family relationships ought to be a high priority for efforts toward reintegrating children with their families, where this is an appropriate option.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all the children experience bad family relations. In fact, some children spoke of positive relations with a parent under circumstances of chronic poverty and broken family life. One boy, whose father had died and whose mother had remarried, was asked where he goes when he is not in the center. He replied

I help my mother. I help her with milking the cows. Then we give the milk to the owners This farm is not ours, but we live on the farm. My [step]father works as a welder. He gets 400 Laris as a salary. He cuts and welds metal.

His caring for his mother surfaced when he was asked whether he loves his mother:

Yes. If I had a salary, I would do a good think and I would buy a house for her, if my brother doesn't do that before I do.

This boy's sentiments caution against universalized views of all children on the streets as coming from families having troubled relationships and suggest the value of income generation programs for the children.

Parents' Perspectives

The salience of poverty for the families of the children on the streets was visible in the three interviews conducted with parents. The mother of the boy described immediately above, for example, said

I am in need of money. I wasn't even able to give my son at least a school education. He is the one who helps me.

The role of poverty was evident in the family description given by a mother whose legs are paralyzed.

We are hardly surviving. That's it. We don't receive anything, no pension, nothing. We arrived here 5 years ago. My parents lived on Lkdiashvili [a street in Tbilisi]. My father died in 1997. Then I fell ill, I was paralyzed. My sister lives in Sochi [a Russian city], and I was in the hospital there. I had my spinal cord tested there. When my mother died, I arrived here. Then my sister arrived and we sold our apartment. Now we live here, on the 9th floor and the water is leaking from the roof. That's how we live....

Asked why the children are on the streets or what would make it possible for the children to return home, the parents cited diverse reasons. Speaking in her yard since in her apartment her husband's drunk brother lay sleeping on the floor, one mother said that her son often does not come home at night.

He may be away for weeks sometimes. He may be in Lilo. Sometimes he has slept on the street, under the fences, in cellars, in entrances of houses.

Speaking of her husband who has a drinking problem, she said "Now as he go older he is worse than he used to be; he is aggressive. He has delirium tremens." She added that he shouts and swears at her and the child, which he had not done earlier in their relationship. Worried about her son's relationship with his father, she said, "My son is afraid of the father. He tries to leave home before his father." Asked what would make it possible for the child to come home more often, the mother replied "If his father wouldn't drink. His friends don't go to their homes either." Her assessment corroborates the views of children reported

in Assessment I that parental alcoholism leads children to the streets. Her reference to her son's friends also not going home suggests the simultaneous influence of the "pull factor" of being with one's friends.

Another parent, the mother who is paralyzed, reported that her son's addiction to computer games is the reason why he leaves home for several days, even going to a neighboring city to play computer games. Asked where her son sleeps when he is not at home, she answered "on the street." Although it is possible that her son has a computer addiction that keeps him away from home, which lacks reliable electricity, it may also be possible that the boy leaves due to the poverty and the depressing environment in which his family lives. In fact, the boy admitted that he begs on the streets and uses the money he receives to buy food for his family.

The third parent said that her son does not come home because

I am old already, he couldn't have had fun with me. He wanted to have fun, and I couldn't have kept him. It was also because our family got destroyed [by her husband's death in 2003].

Later in the interview, she noted that her son would not go anywhere if they had their own apartment, saying "that's the reason why he is so anxious and why he goes to the street." For this mother, then, the combination of her teenager's search for fun, family disintegration, and poor living arrangements led to the boy going to the streets.

Owing in part to a very small sample, it is not clear whether a divergence existed between the parents and their children in regard to their perspective on why children go to the streets. In broad terms, the factors cited by the parents fit the pattern of factors identified by the children in Assessment I. Initially, the interviewers had planned to conduct a more detailed mapping of the correspondence or divergence of individual children and parents. However, this plan became unworkable since it was possible to interview only three parents, and, one of the children was quite unresponsive in his interview, rendering the data unusable. Another child whose parent was also interviewed did not state explicitly what had caused him to be on the streets.

Two parents shared their views of what makes for a happy family. Although both emphasized the importance of money and financial well-being, one parent said that good relationships are primary. In light of the importance children attach to good family relationships, it is important for purposes of reintegration that parents also have equal emphasis on the importance of good family relations and the skills and supports necessary to build positive family relations.

Personal Characteristics

All of the children reported that they are aggressive and often argue and fight with others. The two sisters said that having gone to a boxing school, they have beaten up everyone in their neighborhood regardless of age or gender. One boy stated that he had beaten his father:

If my father touches me, I'll beat him. Once he came drunk and started saying things to me, then I hit him in the stomach with my leg, and he doesn't dare to say anything to me after that.

Poor impulse control, a notable problem for the children, was particularly conspicuous in a boy who said

I am a calm person, but if they make me angry then... If they make me angry, if they swear at me. Lately my friend swore at me, and I beat him so badly that he had brain trauma.

Most of the children either sniff glue or have previously sniffed glue, the effects of which have probably not contributed to the children's ability to self-regulate.

The Rustavi staff added that many of the children on the streets are developmentally behind most children in terms of height, weight, and skeletal structure, and some exhibit regressive issues such as enuresis. On entry to the Center, many children have very limited ability to cooperate and exhibit problems such as deviant behavior, aggression, reserved disposition, poor attention, alienation, and a cynical attitude, which staff viewed as a defense mechanism.

At the same time, the children exhibit many positive qualities. Although they are highly selective in whom they become friends with, they spoke of the importance of having friends and of the fun they had spending time together. Some of the children test the reliability of prospective friends and open up only with those who demonstrate a willingness to keep secrets. Many of the children strive toward leadership, seeking to be the best in what they do. Also, some of them exhibit caring and concern for people in difficult circumstances. One girl said

I help the poor when I have money I give them money and then I walk home. I feel sorry for them, they are little and old. The little ones have no parents, and some of them are sent to beg by their parents. Some of the old people have their children dead, some of them are ill. There are many beggars. There are many gypsies. I help them too—they are also humans.

Such sentiments stand in stark contrast with the demonized images of children on the street that are sometimes encountered in media portrayals and community views.

Community Relations

The girls all reported that relations with their neighbors were problematic due to the neighbors' inclination to gossip, which triggered angry, even violent, responses from the girls. The boys tended to describe their relations with the community as positive and said they received positive feedback for working or not sniffing glue.

In contrast with the boys' comments was the severe stigmatization of children on the streets that surfaced in the FGD with other children. The teenage participants in this FGD said the most teenagers see children who live on the streets as having negative attitudes towards society, as

having been made evil by their life, and as envying children who live in ordinary families under good conditions. Although the FGD members said few differences exist between themselves and the children on the streets, the latter are ignored by society, alienated from society, and subject to prejudices against them. Five out of the six participants reported that they do not want to make friends with children who are on the streets, and all stated that their parents were unwilling to have them befriend children who are on the streets. On a more positive note, the respondents said that children on the streets are oppressed and need attention, care, education and jobs in order to be able to support themselves as adults. The majority of participants favored the creation of special schools that would “show them the other life” and provide elementary and vocational education.

The FGD conducted with community members also indicated that children on the streets are badly stigmatized. The participants said that community members view children on the streets as unintelligent, aggressive, envious, and unclean. They added that most parents would not allow their children to become friends with children on streets out of concern that the latter would have a bad influence on their children. However, the participants pointed out that the children on the streets are not bad but develop an abnormal psychology because they “lack everything.” Displaying considerable empathy, they pointed out that children go to the streets due to family problems such as poverty and unemployment, parental problems of alcoholism or substance abuse, excessively large families, abuse or neglect by parents, or parental pressures on the children to beg on the streets. Also, they noted that if family conditions are unfavorable, a child should not be returned to the family but placed in an appropriate foster or adopted family. None of the adult respondents had information about the supports available in Georgia for children on the streets. This lack of knowledge is unfortunate since it limits community members’ ability to channel children to the supports that do exist and to monitor the adequacy of the supports. Together, these observations suggest that the project could be enriched by increasing the awareness of the general community of the situation of children on the streets, the harm caused by stigmatization and isolation, and the supports available to assist children on the streets.

An encouraging development was the community members’ desire to help the children on the streets. This desire is the backbone of community mobilization efforts to support children and goes well beyond the development of awareness of existing supports. During the FGD, respondents pointed out that there are families that are willing to adopt children on the streets, provided that the family received adequate financial support. All the participants agreed that the government should develop programs to prevent separation of children from their mothers and to support children who are on the streets. Following the FGD, one well-placed community member commented that maybe the community members themselves could do something, perhaps even start a private foundation, to support children on the streets. An important area for future project development is active mobilization of community resources to support children and also capacity building that enables the community to advocated effectively with the government for the development of appropriate supports and options for children on the streets.

Program Impact

The parents were quick to point out positive changes that had occurred in their children since they had begun going to the Center. The following is an excerpt from one interview:

Has he [the child] changed since he started going there [the Center]?
Very much.

How did he change?

Towards positive, I am happy that he is not wandering in the streets. When I used to ask him when would he come back home, he would answer: I don't know, leave me alone." He was always saying that to me. He used to come once in every two days. Now he comes every day, and he stays home overnight as well....

What was he like before he started going to the Center?

He was anxious and nervous all the time. He used to look at everything with disgust. You couldn't have asked him to do anything. He used to say to let him alone all the time. I am very happy that he has changed. Now he tells me "Mommy, how can I help you?" He also goes to the shop when I ask him to...

Other parents also reported seeing positive changes in their children. One mother expressed happiness with the Center because her son obeys the staff, the staff provide good role models, and children at the Center assessment and read. Another parent commented that her son "forgot about computers" and has fewer chances of interacting with "bad boys" now than before he had started going to the Center. However, not all the parents reported seeing equal changes in their children. One mother reported that her son still sniffs glue, leaves home for weeks, and sleeps on the streets. This is unsurprising since the RLP in Rustavi is very new and since much remains to be learned about how to reach each child.

The Rustavi staff also reported seeing positive changes in the children who came to the Center. Primary among these were improved personal hygiene, learning of elementary rules of behavior, increased willingness to respect others, increased trust, decreased cynicism and aggression, increased ability to compromise and collaborate with others, reduced frequency of glue sniffing, increased sense of responsibility, and increased frequency of laughter among the children. They also reported that through outings in the park and other places, local people have decreased their stigmatization of the children and the children are increasingly able to play with other children. The Rustavi staff attribute these changes to their love of the children, acceptance of children "the way they are," their willingness to set boundaries and to provide positive role models, their provision of activities that build cognitive, emotional, social and physical skills, and their engagement of children in an ongoing process of socialization that prizes collaboration, nonviolent interaction, and a sense of responsibility. Although these observations are preliminary, they offer useful insights into why the project exerts a positive impact.

In the eyes of the assessment team, it is impressive that the Rustavi staff have accomplished much under difficult conditions. In addition to the complexities of just having started up and working with a challenging population, they lack a permanent building for the Center and the funding needed to enable it to thrive. Also, the staff reported that at the beginning of the project, they had not been prepared emotionally for the job. Daily personal interaction with children and families in very difficult circumstances imposes a host of emotional burdens

that ought to be addressed through appropriate staff care and support. This, too, is an area in which the project could potentially be enriched.

Limits of the Assessment

Any narrative assessment is limited by the number and limited diversity of the participants, and this assessment was no exception. For this reason, it is essential to complement individually focused data with data collected on larger, more representative samples of the group under assessment as was done in Assessment I. Also the data collected would probably have been more accurate had additional time been taken to establish trust with the participants, particularly children who were on or of the streets. The salience of the trust issues became apparent after the fact when in Rustavi, two children who had shown no discomfort or upsetness during their interview, expressed negative aftereffects the following day, saying they did not want to talk any more with outsiders. Although more trust building might have circumvented this problem, it may also be that interviews about personal information are poorly suited for a context such as Rustavi. Another significant limit concerns the accuracy of the information collected. Many children who are on the streets have developed sophisticated skills of communication and presentation, some of which are not entirely truthful. In this respect, it would have been useful to have a longer period during which to collect data and use methods of triangulation more fully to achieve higher levels of accuracy. Last, some data loss occurred as a result of not recording the FGDs. To correct this problem, it is advisable to record future FGDs to insure accurate capture of the participants' narratives.

General Conclusions and Recommendations

Options for Enriching the Rebuilding Lives Project

Since this is a draft report that is still under review by SC-GFO, it would be inappropriate to present firm recommendations at this stage. It is possible, however, to outline options for enrichment that emerged from the two studies combined and that SC-GFO might consider on grounds of feasibility and other criteria.

1. Data Sharing and Reflection

With data collection and analysis completed, this could be an appropriate time for SC-GFO to reflect on the data and their implications for current programs. A valuable first step would be to share the results in whatever form seems most appropriate with the Centers in which the assessment was done, both children and adults, and any other interested persons in the communities. A preliminary presentation of results was made to SC-GFO and the local implementing partner - Child & Environment - by Laura Murray and Katherine Semrau on July 22, 2005. The results could be discussed in light of current Center activities and the RLP with the intent of thinking through and prioritizing the various options outlined below and others that SC-GFO staff and partners discern.

2. Added Skills-based Training for Children and Families

In view of the powerful influence of poverty in the lives of the children and families, it might be useful to expand vocational education for both children and families. To support reintegration, children and families could participate in skills training that market analyses indicate could lead to employment and a steady income. Also, there may be additional programs that focus more on increasing the healthy behavior patterns and good decision-making skills in children who already spend significant portions of time on the street. However, since the data also indicate the importance of relational factors, it would be useful also to focus on building in both children and families relational skills such as communication and nonviolent conflict resolution.

3. Greater Emphasis on Prevention

Since the two studies have effectively identified the factors that place children at risk of going to the streets, it is possible to identify cases of likely separation in advance and intervene by providing a mixture of vocational skills that alleviate economic stress, offer incentives more potent than those offered by life on the streets, and build relational skills that reduce destructive conflict and make it more likely that children will stay in the home. In light of the harm done through children being on the streets, increased emphasis on a preventive approach would seem to be a good investment. Primary prevention programs aimed at children who spend time on the street may also focus on families or caregivers identified as high-risk. For example, the Centers may also design a “Parents Night” concept where they offer education on a variety of relevant topics such as “How to care for an oppositional child” or “Where to go to get help with ____ (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse).”

4. Increased Community Involvement

In view of the strong stigmatization of children on the street, it is vital to engage community members on issues of children on and of the streets. A useful first step is to provide information about the children in ways that undermine the prevalent negative stereotypes and about the supports for children that exist. In addition, useful steps toward a more community-based approach would be to identify community resources, to help mobilize group discussions and planning efforts, and to support self-initiated projects on behalf of at-risk children and families.

5. Greater Family Participation

Frequent meeting of parents and staff, and also meetings of parents, would be useful in enhancing parents’ sense of responsibility and involvement in the RLP. Already parents have provided useful feedback and suggestions. Parent associations could be a valuable resource to draw upon.

6. Greater Child Participation

Since the children on the streets exhibit leadership qualities and, as this project has demonstrated, have a wealth of useful ideas, it might be appropriate to engage children more fully in designing project activities such as methods of assessment. Some children seemed to be interested in sports and the acquisition of various skills. To consider the children’s interests in designing activities would enhance their satisfaction with the RLP centers and increase their desire to stay off the streets.

These options and suggestions are offered in a spirit of dialogue to the RLP team and its stakeholders, who have exhibited leadership on behalf of at-risk children in Georgia.

Next Steps: Needs Assessment and Program Evaluation

The different assessment methods used in Studies I and II both yielded valuable and convergent results. The BU approach has several comparative advantages. First, it permits statistical analyses and lays the foundation for quantitative analyses. This is a key advantage for donors and practitioners who want to know not only what works but also how much impact can be achieved at particular levels of funding. Second, it offers a culturally grounded methodology that can be used in many different cultures and situations, builds on local understandings, and circumvents problems associated with the imposition of instruments and unvalidated measures constructed by outsiders. Third, it has proven to be an effective means of obtaining information about sensitive issues in a context where trust is an issue. Since the questions concern people in general, it offers participants a safe means of answering questions without delving into the details of their personal situation. In the Georgian context, this advantage was conspicuous, as the interviews had few, if any, negative aftereffects, and some participants spontaneously interjected information on their own situation. For these and the reasons outlined earlier, both the BU and CU teams recommend that the project continue on to Phases 2 and 3.

The narrative method used in Assessment II proved useful in bringing forward the personal views of children in Tbilisi, in learning about issues of stigmatization and views toward children who are on the streets, and in documenting project impact through the triangulation of reports from children, family members, and RLP staff. However, this method, which invites participants to discuss personal information, some of which may be painful, may have adverse aftereffects on a minority of participants and may bring to the fore issues of trust that are foremost in the minds of children on the streets. In situations such as Rustavi, where trust issues are enormous and where the RLP was just starting up, the potential costs of conducting personal interviews with children probably outweigh the benefits. Still, used selectively, the methodology complements the BU approach by offering a view of individual children's development and the choices they make at different points in time. Globally, assessment of children on the streets could be strengthened through the conduction of longitudinal studies of particular children who participate in programs such as the RLP. In cities such as Tbilisi, the narrative methodology is well suited for this task. It is recommended that, on an ongoing basis, the BU methodology be complemented by narrative methodologies such as those used in Assessment II.

As part of this project, a number of local Georgians were trained in qualitative methods. We experienced an unusual advantage in that our trainees were overall highly trained and experienced in related areas of work. In our recent experience, the local interviewers were quick studies in the assessment methods taught. The trainees appreciated the methodology and seemed genuinely interested in the implementation of them. The fact that many of them had experience working with children was evident in their ease of conversing and making children of all ages feel comfortable quickly. This is a critical skill in qualitative interviewing, and one that is not always easily mastered. We feel these interviewers could easily be trained to train and supervise others.

Thus, the data collected to date strongly suggests a firm basis for proceeding with the subsequent phases of the assessment, Phases 2 and 3.

Phase 2: Instrument Development and Testing

The second step in this process is to use the qualitative data to develop a locally appropriate instrument(s) to assess the issues that emerged in the qualitative assessment as well as indicators of child, family and community functioning. This instrument would then form the basis for assessing project impact. Since the current assessment focused on causes of children being in the street, measures of the length of time children are in the street would be important, as well as measurement of some of the issues raised as causes.

In cases where this information matches that of existing instruments from other countries, these existing instruments can be adapted in preference to creating a new instrument. Whether or not a new or existing instrument is used, the language used by informants in the qualitative assessment forms the basis for the questions, to ensure the use of words understandable to local people (rather than expressing the concepts in English and having them translated). Testing is then done by using the instruments to interview persons from the local population, and comparing the results with assessments by the interviewee (and others who know them) of whether they have the problems being assessed, and of their level of function. Agreement between the instrument and assessment by the local people suggests that the instrument is accurate.

Phase 3: Quantitative Assessment

In Phase 3, the instrument developed in phases 1 and 2 is used in quantitative assessments. Initially this is done both to assess needs and to provide a baseline. The instruments is then repeated after the intervention and compared with the initial assessment, in order to assess impact. These instruments can be used to conduct accurate assessments of other programs addressing the same issues among the same population.

In summary, our experience in Georgia so far, based on two trips by BU faculty and conversations with SC-GFO and local partners, suggests that there is both a need and interest for these types of qualitative assessments in other areas of programming (in addition to programs for street children), and a substantial underlying capacity to do them. As in many other countries undergoing development, there appears to be many programs aimed at social issues but little capacity for assessment of program impact. This is a considerable opportunity for Georgians to obtain the training in assessment validation and have culturally valid instruments to use indefinitely. Fortunately, Georgia has the unusual advantage of substantial numbers of professionals who are highly trained and experienced in related areas of work. As such, we suspect that these interviewers will be able to quickly learn and implement the methods that constitute Phases 2 and 3. If this is correct, a possible follow-on (or concurrent) activity to subsequent phases of the current project would be to expand links to other local staff and organizations; to conduct assessments of other projects while building local capacity and sustainability of program evaluation methodology.

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