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The street and children's informal economy in Cape Verde[1]

*Since the 1990s Cape Verde has undergone dramatic economic and political
transformations that have brought about growing social class distinction. The two main
towns (Praia and Mindelo) have grown rapidly in the last decades and their urban
structure today reflects the increasing polarisation of the population. Middle and upper
class families occupy the older parts of town and the recently built planned areas,
while spontaneous neighbourhoods spread without planning on the less valuable land.
It is in these latter areas that most social issues associated with childhood and youth
have become highly visible in the last decade. In this article I will focus on children's
reasons for going to live on the streets of Mindelo, arguing that it is in terms of
autonomous mobility within a non-heterogeneous and profoundly divided urban and
social space that we can better understand what is commonly defined as the
phenomenon of street children.*

Cape Verde, Childhood, Street Children, Child Migration.

INTRODUCTION: ALEX'S PUPPY[2]

Alex is eleven years old and comes from Porto Novo, the main village on Santo Antão, an island in the Cape Verde archipelago. His childish face and short stature make him look much younger than he claims to be. He argues that he was living on the streets in Porto Novo and came to Mindelo because "there is more movement, more people, more tourists, more money." His father, of whom he has no memory, emigrated to Spain when he was just a baby. Alex has three older brothers and one younger one; his mother is disabled.

I met Alex for the first time on a Saturday night in Praça Nova, the main work-place for young street people in downtown Mindelo. He was wandering with an older boy, asking passers-by for spare change. He ran away one week earlier, arriving in São Vicente as a stowaway on a ship, the *Ribeira de Paul*. He told me that he now slept on the street. After our first meeting, I tried to get institutions and NGOs involved in Alex's case, attempting to contact his family and having him somehow returned home. He looked naïve and much younger than the other kids I knew.

A few days later, as I strolled through Praça Nova, looking for Alex, I met a group of children, led by Redy, a vivacious, exuberant kid I had known for some time. Redy used to live with his family but now makes money and finds extra food on the street. I explained that I was trying to get Alex back to his mother in Porto Novo. Defiantly, and almost angrily, Redy asked me, "Why the hell do you want to send him back to Santo Antão if he doesn't want to go? He has already run away from there five times! If you take him back, he will just run away again!" All the boys confirmed that it was not the first time he had run away. "He comes here to São Vicente, and then goes back, but he keeps running away from home!" they told me.

When I finally found Alex, I asked him what he really wanted to do. "I don't want to go back to Porto Novo," he told me with a smile. "I want to stay here, on the street." Later that night, when I was talking about Alex's case with Xana, a young prostitute, she remarked: "At times it is better to stay on the street than with your family." I later went back to Praça Nova and observed Alex playing with some younger street children, amid a crowd of strolling people, wondering about the right thing to do. Should I bring him back to his household

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(where apparently nobody cared about him and conditions were dire), ask ICCA (the Cape Verdean Child and Adolescent Protection Institute) to intervene, starting a process that could bring Alex to a street-child facility (from where he would run away as soon as he could), or leave him to live on the street, with a future as a car washer or jail inmate?

Later that week, I was told that Alex was living at Nho Djunga, the oldest, most famous street-child outreach facility on the island. I called Dona Kátia (a social worker at Nho Djunga whom I had previously met and interviewed) for some news. "Yes," she told me, "he's with us now. We are already in touch with SOS Children's Village in Praia, and he will be sent there." Kátia got in touch with a social worker in Porto Novo to inquire about Alex's family. "We have decided," she told me, "that returning him to his family is impossible at the moment and we are going to send him to Praia." I asked her if I might go and visit Alex at Nho Djunga. She agreed and asked me to hold. After waiting for some time, she came back to the telephone and told me Alex had left without permission: "Now we'll have to look for him…" I finally met up with Alex at Nho Djunga the following day. From what Alex told me, he was told that he would be sent back to Porto Novo. He told me that he missed his mother, and wanted to go back to her. Apparently no one   discussed the chance of being sent to Praia with him.

For several days I did not see Alex in the streets. However, later that week, I found him again in Praça Nova. From morning until night, I saw him around, begging. I asked him where he had been for the last few days, and whether he was still staying at the Nho Djunga. He told me he wasn't staying there any more: "There you are not allowed to play like here, in the street. There you have to go to school, then you eat, and then you have homework. You never play!" I asked, "So where have you been these days? I haven't seen you around" He replied candidly, "Home." Amazed, I inquired, "Home? What do you mean?" I found out he had been back to his mother's house in Santo Antão to see a puppy a friend had sold him, which he had taken there earlier that week.

"So you've been there twice?" I asked. "Yes," he replied. We went to go sit on a bench in Praça Nova and I bought him a hamburger at a kiosk. "How's your mum?" I asked him. "She's doing fine," he answered.

In this paper I will examine children's reasons for engaging with, moving to and living on the streets of Mindelo, arguing that it is only in terms of autonomous mobility within a non-heterogeneous and profoundly divided urban and social space that we can better understand what is commonly defined as the phenomenon of "street children." Alex's case (quoted above) is remarkably emblematic in this regard. Below, I consider the 'street' as a potentially effective survival strategy for young people that can be adopted but does not *define* or *identify* a clear-cut set of actors. According to these assertions, I suggest that the relationship between actors and the street environment must be viewed as opportunistic rather than fatalistic. I argue that such a lens can significantly assist researchers in their quest to

understand children's decision-making processes by better identifying children's motives for migrating to or staying on the street - even when alternatives may be available.

Kristin Ferguson (2006) recently proposed to approach the issue of 'street children' from a similar angle. As I do, Ferguson refers to the movement of children from home to the street as "child street migration," claiming that the phrase 'street working children' might better reflect children's activities on and experiences of the street (2006: 706). Acknowledging that children are involved in labour migration for self or household support, Lorraine Young (2004) points out that children moving to large city streets in Sub-Saharan Africa (a phenomenon she defines as "street-ward migration") are perhaps the most visible group engaging in autonomous independent movements (Young 2004: 472-4). Analysing the reasons why Bangladeshi children move to the streets, Conticini and Hulme (2007), also use the notion of 'migration to the street' and acknowledge that such mobility can be an empowering process. They write, "Street life not only involves vulnerability, but also processes of empowerment through which children exercise their personal agency and develop innovative coping behaviours (Conticini and Hulme 2007: 205)."

Considering street-ward mobility as autonomous migration does not mean ignoring relevant pushing factors that entice young people to move to the street (household structure, poor parenting, corporal punishment). The reasons for *any* kind of migration are always multiple, and obviously cannot be limited to rational economic decisions. The point is not to give a romanticized or mythical picture of street life, while ignoring social and economic constraints. We know from other contexts that when structural conditions translate into negative family environments, some children choose to actively engage in street-ward migration (Young 2004: 485). Nonetheless, it was exactly within these conditions that I found considerable evidence of children's agency, coping strategies and autonomy in decision-making.

A photograph from my fieldwork metaphorically captures the ambivalence of this perspective. Notably it is not a picture I took myself but a foreground self-portrait that Helton, a fifteen-year-old boy who had been living in the street of Mindelo since when he was nine, took with my camera (see picture 1). His smile illuminated by the camera flash, the raised thumb, direct gaze: everything effectively conveys self-confidence and a virile, bragging toughness. Still, another element attracts our attention in this picture.

Picture 1 - Self-portrait, Helton. Mindelo, July 2007

As the picture was taken in the evening, Helton's shining, poised face emerges in theatrical contrast to the darkness of the background, the gloomy trees of the main square in downtown Mindelo, blowing in the night wind. The effect is indeed involuntary. Even so, the contrast between Helton's triumphant face in the foreground and the dim landscape in the background is a remarkable visual metaphor of the tension between street children's agency and victimization, which is one of the hardest theoretical and moral conundrums of anthropological research focusing on children in difficult conditions. As in Helton's self portrait, my objective is therefore to find the right balance between the background and the foreground, making agency and constraint, resilience and suffering, fit (even if in contrast) into the same picture.

While this paper deals primarily with the issue of street children and youth in the town of Mindelo[3], it is part of a wider project I am carrying out on street youth and juvenile delinquency in Praia and Mindelo, the two largest urban areas in Cape Verde. Interviews with a wide range of actors involved with both street children and youth 'deviancy' in general were carried out (NGO personnel, project leaders, social workers, police officers, lawyers, attorneys and local politicians). I tried to build a dialogue with children making a living and/or living on the street, sharing in their daily lives through participant observation without overstraining the relationship with formal interviews. Prison inmates were also interviewed. In some cases, relatives of street children and former street children were interviewed as well.

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[3] Precisely because I conceive the engagement with the street in terms of mobility and practice rather that territoriality and essential identity, the number of street-engaged boys in Mindelo is difficult to quantify. Very roughly however, I worked with a group of boys varying between 20 and 40, aged between 11 and 20.

Moreover, since street children cannot be understood without a critical examination of domestically based childhoods (Hecht 1998: 21), several areas in the periphery of both towns were visited and addressed in the research.

Let me go back to Helton's self-portrait. In another way, this picture illustrates both one of the difficulties faced and methods employed in my research. Street children in Cape Verde, though limited in number, have been targeted in the last decade by an increasing number of 'projects' – each based on some kind of field research. Even though most of these projects did little for the street boys themselves, the frequent, stubbornly repetitive questionnaire-based research achieved the result of making children fed up with researchers, legitimately suspicious, quite closed in on themselves and unwilling to answer any further direct inquiries about their lives. Though more classic ethnographic methods were also used in my research (such as informal interviews and participant observation) visual methods, particularly photo elicitation (cf. Harper 2002), proved highly effective for overcoming the difficulties mentioned above. As Young and Barret (2001) stress, visual methods can be particularly important for developing cumulative insights into the street child's urban environment from the his/her perspective, as well as introducing a relaxed, fun atmosphere and allowing the children to take control of the process without imposing adult influence (Young and Barret 2001: 142).

Despite repeated warnings from people I knew in Cape Verde, I therefore lent my camera out to the boys I was working with. I taught some of them how to use the camera in basic mode, and let them take pictures of themselves and the street environment. Later on, I had the boys comment on the pictures they had taken. Besides turning research into a relaxed, amusing activity, making for enthusiastic participation by the boys in research activities, the visual documents provided insight into the children's self-perception and frequently elicited comments and memories that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise.

HOMES

As with Alex, at the beginning, interviews and dialogues with children and youth in Cape Verde revealed that, running away had been a choice for many of them, and they seemed to consider street life relatively satisfactory. Many insisted that they preferred to stay on the streets instead of being at home or in street-child outreach centres. In order to understand why the street could be appealing to some children, I will trace life on the streets of downtown Mindelo to the outskirts of the town, providing a glimpse of both urban areas and the households the children grew up in, arguing that (despite the domestic ideology prevailing in child-focused social interventions) as Panter-Brick (2002) points out, children are not necessarily better off living with their families (p.161).

Since the 1990s, Cape Verde has undergone dramatic economic and political transformations that have brought about a considerable increase in urban populations and a growing social class distinction. The two main towns (Praia and Mindelo) have rapidly expanded in the last decades. Mindelo went from around 51,000 inhabitants in 1990, to more than 74,000 in 2008, while Praia, the capital city, went from 71,000 in 1990 to 130,000 in 2008 (INE 2008). All national indicators point to a growing income disparity and social class polarization. Though the middle class has grown considerably in recent years, there is a certain stratum of the population still living in conditions of extreme poverty. According to the 2000/2001 national statistical survey, 37% of the Cape Verdean population is considered 'poor'. Of this, 54% are considered 'very poor', accounting for 20% of the whole population. Even though 70% of the poor population lives in rural areas, it is in the urban areas that poverty is more severe (INE 2002).

Mindelo's urban structure reflects the increasing polarisation of its population. Climbing one of the hills surrounding the plain where the city is built around the harbour, one has a dramatic view of the more than 60,000-inhabitant town. Middle and upper class families occupy the older, central areas of town and the recently developed areas, while sprawling, unplanned neighbourhoods spread over the less valuable land. The newest houses were built on the slopes of the hills enclosing the town, creating a large and growing periphery with little if any basic infrastructure, where poverty and unemployment are widespread. It is in these latter areas that most social issues associated with childhood and youth have become highly visible in the last decade.

Due to the high mobility of the younger Cape Verdean population and the peculiar features of the Cape Verdean household (Rodrigues 2007; Grassi and Évora 2007), many children grow up in single parent families (usually single-mother households). It can be particularly difficult for working women to cope with this situation, especially when the support network of the extended family is unavailable, which is the case for some recent migrants who have moved to Mindelo from the nearby island of Santo Antão. Many children are actually left to themselves during a large part of the day; in a few cases, they are even locked in their houses while their parents are working.

> Nailson is now 16 and lives in an outreach facility in São Vicente. He was born in São Vicente but grew up in Santo Antão. He is the eldest of 13 brothers and sisters. When Nailson was 2 months old, his parents moved to Santo Antão, in Ribeirão, a neighbourhood of Ribeira Grande. His father went there to work as a farmer and took his family with him. After a few years, his mother left and Nailson stayed with his father, who had to work and left him at home alone with two of his younger brothers for long periods. His father even used to stay away for several days. Their mother could not help them, as she had too many

> children: five by one man and four by another. His father had five more children by another woman. It was their grandmother who gave them something to eat now and then (From my field-notes).

As in the case of Nailson, the only parent dies, migrates or simply is no longer capable of caring for the children, who are left with a grandmother or, more rarely, an aunt (Giuffré 2007; Rodrigues 2007). As the grandmother grows older or cannot provide adequate care and attention, children may come into closer contact with opportunities on the 'street'. It is often a peer who, already living on the street, gradually absorbs them into street lifestyle. Children eventually decide not to go back home or to only go back sporadically. However, in some cases, the relationship with the mother or grandmother is preserved, even if the child is no longer living with her. Actually, in many single-mother households, children are asked to make a contribution.

> Francisco is now 13. He lived on the street from 6 to 8 and is now living and studying in an outreach facility. "When I was born, my mother left me at the hospital, while my father, who died one year ago, vanished. It was only a few years ago that I met my mother. My grandmother (father's mother) took care of me, but she had little food to give me and my brother, who was three years older than me. I took to the street. My grandmother was worried and asked the police to look for me. The police eventually found me and brought me back to my grandmother. But I didn't do anything! Anyway I didn't want to stay there, so I ran away again. *Rua sabi* (the street is good). In the street I was never hungry. People liked me; they gave me food and money. We went there, near the *Clube Nautico*, to cook our food. The older ones beat us, to steal our money. That's true. But on the street nobody is in charge (*na rua ninguin manda*). Now and then my brother and I gave some money to my grandmother. My father died a year ago. He worked at the docks. One day, when I was living on the street, I went to see him. He asked me why I wasn't with my grandmother. He bought me homemade yoghurt and told me to go back home. He worked very hard, from morning to night; he could not take care of me."

The relationship with the family can therefore be multifaceted. Some young people live totally alone on the street, keeping all they can earn for themselves. Others share a part of the money they make with their mother or grandmother, in a way acting as autonomous workers, but keeping a link with the household. The street is often an environment where children can earn money, contributing to the family income. In some cases leaving home for the street can be an altruistic move in response to chronic poverty; attempting to support the extended family powerfully illustrates children's agency in constructing their own social lives.

> Eric is 13 years old and makes a living washing cars, begging and pushing hash on the street. He earns about 500 escudos a day. Though I saw him sleeping on the street several times, he claims that he lives with his mother, father and three brothers, the youngest of whom is 4. He gives 300 escudos to his mother and keeps the rest for himself. "You know, to buy some fruit juice…" His mother doesn't work, but his father does, as a painter. Eric has been washing cars for a year now. "I liked school, but my mother could not provide for all of us. I was the oldest one and had to go and earn a living."

I often observed young boys leaving their slums in the periphery, reaching the city centre, spending the day in the street begging, and going back home at night. Street begging can also be a kind of part-time activity or a 'summer job' for many children, carried out after school or during vacations.

> Martinho is 11. I met him in the city centre, where he was begging for money and food. He lives in Ribeirinha in a shanty, just bought for 40,000 escudos, with his father, mother and four brothers (aged two, four, six, and nine). His father, he claims, does not work. His mother, on the contrary, is a domestic worker in a house in Bela Vista, earning 1,000 escudos a month. She's been ill for a while though and unable to work. So at the moment there is no food at home and, since it is the summer school holiday, Martinho goes to the city centre every day looking for food. "I don't like it very much on the street. The older ones beat the younger ones. At night I always sleep at home."

In Mindelo, only boys live on or become closely engaged with the street as independent agents. This does not mean that girls do not appear on the street; rather, in this context they are generally non-independent – carrying out economic activity *for* the household as street sellers, mostly accompanying their mothers. The different roles assigned to boys and girls within the household and the Cape Verdean gender ideology explain why the street population is entirely masculine.

Though I did not carry out specific research into female children, gender appears to be a relevant element of differentiation in low-class young people's life strategies. Girls usually remain at home until they are much older than child street migrants, as they play a crucial role in the management of the household, such as cleaning, cooking and looking after younger siblings. Conflicts generally arise later, in their early teens. When girls leave home, sex work can be a shared survival strategy in which access to conspicuous consumption is gained, a crucial component in defining youth identities, especially in early and later adolescence. There is practically no institution dealing with female runaway adolescents – whether involved with prostitution or not. This is probably because young girls quite easily

turn into young mothers; most of them move back to their mother's or grandmother's house after getting pregnant.

Economic poverty, however, was not the only reason for boys moving onto the street. Actually, economic poverty is never a sufficient cause for street-ward migration and there are several thousand boys living below the poverty line that do not migrate to the streets. As in several other contexts, non-economic factors play a decisive role in children's decisions to move to the streets (Lucchini 1997, Conticini and Hulme 2007).

Another crucial motivation for street migration in Mindelo is violence and corporal punishment within the family[4]. Several children I interviewed said that they had left home due to domestic conflicts or violence. This is also given as one of the reasons why children are afraid to go back home, as they are often scared of being punished for running away.

> I met Wilson in Praça Nova, where he was asking passers-by for spare change. As a newbie to the street, the 'street veterans' were constantly chasing him off. I approached him and tried to talk to him. He was scared and the first thing he said was that he didn't want to go back home. He was 11. It was difficult to understand what had happened to him. I gathered that he had been living with his mother and had run away. His parents broke up. He was reluctant to go back to his mothers' house and scared that his father might beat him for having run away. He finally agreed to give me his father's address and allowed me to go and talk to him. The following day I took a taxi to Horta Seca neighbourhood to meet Wilson's father. Domingo was born in Santo Antão, had no job and was basically surviving by selling *grog* (sugar-cane spirit) at his place, which he had converted into a small bar. When Wilson was 1 year old, Domingo told me, his mother had gone to Praia and left her son with him until he was 5. Since she had come back, Wilson had lived with her in São Vicente, running away now and then. Wilson's mother, Domingo claimed, had no job either. He said that she had a disordered life, "she always goes around", frequently leaving the children alone. She beat Wilson, who, for this reason, had already run away from home several times before. Wilson was unregistered and had never been to school.

While reports on street children in Cape Verde (e.g. Anjos and Varela 2005) and most social-workers I talked to described the street as a really violent place where children were constantly victims of physical and sexual abuse, most children I interviewed said that they

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[4] Conticini and Hulme in their analysis of Bangladeshi children's reasons for moving to the street claim that "the perception of street-living children held by the general public, policy makers and many social scientists in Bangladesh is filtered through, and conditioned by, a dominant narrative which posits that children are on the street because their parents or guardians cannot meet the household's basic material needs. The role played by violence within the household and the strength of the social bonds built by children on the street are too often ignored by commentators on this 'problem' in Bangladesh. … Our main finding is that the breakdown of social relationships within the household, and not economic poverty, is the main cause of child migration to the street" (2007: 203, 207).

had migrated to the street exactly because of the violence (usually physical) they had to endure *at home*. For most street children the street was perceived of as *safer* than their homes. According to a recent anthropological survey, 40% of the street children that claimed to be victims of any form of violence said that the family household was the main context of maltreatment (Anjos and Varala 2005: 36).

According to a social worker at the *Centro de Acolhimento Nocturno* (an outreach facility for children at risk), causalities leading to the street-ward migration can be identified within the family. Unemployment or irregular jobs, the social worker claimed, were common among low-income families, who could not or were not interested in providing adequate parenting for their children. Sometimes, she maintained, children were asked to look after themselves in the street, scavenging food for themselves and the family. Alcoholism and maltreatment were often causes of child abandonment. She said that many children claimed to have run away because they were severely beaten by their parents. Other social workers pointed to similar causes; according to another social worker employed in the religious NGO, *Operação Carinho*:

> …there is a general lack of responsibility towards children. They are somehow left to themselves. They are allowed to circulate freely in the street, even at night, and nobody really cares. Some of them are victims of maltreatment by their own parents or step-parents. Some others are sent out into the street to beg, as their mothers don't want to work. The fathers are usually absent and working mothers cannot really look after their children. There are cases of mothers with four children, no man, and unemployed. As a matter of fact, most street children still have a family or a relative and a house in São Vicente!

In turn, a social worker at ICCA confirmed, "Often children don't find a home where they live and look for it outside, on the street." A psychologist working at the same institution broadened the debate, pointing out that Cape Verde does not really provide social support for families:

> There is a wide range of factors (like drugs, alcohol, etc) determining social difficulties that bring about what we call 'dysfunctional families.' Families are economically weak, and for this reason some children don't want to go back home. What we need here is social support, limiting poverty and hence child abandonment. With children and adolescents on the street… the problem is that on the street they have their vices, they can eat whatever they want, they have all the space they need. How can we convince them to go back to a 'dysfunctional family'?

An experienced social worker at the *Centro Juvenil Nho Djunga* (an outreach facility for children at risk) gave me a similar 'family-blaming' perspective:

> It is usually the case that poorer families have many children. Then the father does not want them and the mother does not want to take care of them… Or the mother has too many children, and the father doesn't give anything – some fathers give up their jobs so as not to have to pay child support. For example, there are many people here from Santo Antão. The mother comes first to find a job, then calls her children to join her. But these children always stay at home alone, and little by little get attracted by the city. At times children don't go to school so that they can go to the city centre begging for money and then they go back home.

Or, in the words of another social worker from the same institution:

> Children go onto the street due to irresponsible fatherhood and/or motherhood. In the large majority of cases however, the fathers don't accept their responsibility and run away. The relationship that led to pregnancy wasn't a close one and when the woman got pregnant, the man took off. And the mother is left alone. In some cases, there comes a time when the mother thinks that her child is just terrible and, so to speak, she opens her hands and lets him go out onto the street one day, then another, and he ends up staying there. For some mothers it is even simpler. The child stays on the street, he eats there… And a vicious circle starts here. The child goes and comes back, goes and comes back, till he finally stays. We always think that the family protects children, but sometimes the children are beaten or they don't have clothes or food.

Most social workers' analyses correctly pointed out the difficulties that children had to cope with within their households – making them increasingly detached from their homes and involved with the street. However, these analyses seldom acknowledge that street-life, besides being a solution to problems children face within their households and neighbourhoods, could be appealing *in itself;* though not devoid of dangers and perils, it is a fascinating environment and social world.

THE APPEAL OF THE STREET

When dealing with inexperienced social workers (and researchers), passers-by and tourists, street-engaged children did not hesitate to play the part of victims, somehow corroborating to their own advantage the image of poverty and victimhood commonly ascribed to them. In other contexts, for instance whilst conversing with other boys, or with people not directly involved in the 'rescue industry', children did not portray street-life in such

a 'victimizing' light. 'Victimcy,' as Mats Utas (2005) shows, can be quite an effective form of agency. Though dire family conditions and poverty can be crucial 'pushing factors,' we should not forget other reasons why children move to the street, what we might call the 'pulling factor' (cf. Lucchini's 'ludic factors' 1997: 6). As Lorraine Young (2004) has underlined, by "focusing solely on issues of poverty as the reason why children take to the streets… street children are viewed as innocent victims on whom social, economic and political conditions are imposed forcing them onto the streets. This diminishes children's autonomy in the decision-making process and neglects other factors, which might influence their migration decisions (p.473)."

Given the limited economic resources within the household, it is not surprising that one of the central motivations for children to run away or to spend time on the street is the economic opportunities and relative food affluence. Street working children's economy consists basically of begging and service labour in the informal sector, indulging sometimes in pick-pocketing, shop lifting and very rarely in marijuana pushing. Children and young people also show a great capacity for grasping the opportunities the street can offer. Due to the nature of their economy, for example, street children survive best when there is more 'movement': in contexts where people gather to participate in cultural events or where tourists converge. Mobility of street children in Cape Verde therefore follows a seasonal agenda, reflecting the fluctuations of global tourism, the holiday calendar of Cape Verdean migrants and the national programme of festivals and cultural events.

This combined strategy can be highly effective for the streetwise, to the point that in specific periods of the year, when the "movement is good" as they say, the children's problem is not *making* money, but *hiding* money, to avoid being robbed by the older children at night. A social worker at the *Nho Djunga* centre related to me the following vignette:

> There was a boy who was in the street and we found a job for him as a smith.
> He earned 100 escudos a day. One day I met him, and he told me, "I should go
> back to the street. I go there, to the city centre and I can easily get about 800
> escudos a day!

Several trusted bar-owners in downtown Mindelo act as 'banks' for children, keeping their money safe and giving it back to them when they need it. Street working children in this sense are independent economic agents seeking to 'work' where opportunities are better. Given the conditions of extreme poverty of numerous households both in the rural areas and in the outskirts of towns like Mindelo and Praia, it is not surprising that the street appeals to some children.

In conversations with the boys, however, the economic advantages of the street were never considered as separate from independence and love of freedom, two of the most cited

reasons for moving to and staying on the street. Actually, liberty and autonomy are key values for children living on the streets of Mindelo, and several of them praised the street as a space of freedom. Consider these short passages from interviews I had with street children and former street children:

> You ask me if the street is good. When you are on the street you think that it is a good life. You are tranquil. When you move onto the street and you run away from home, yes, this is good. You don't have to go to school, you never lack food and you never lack friends and life together. In the street you live like a rebel. You are tranquil. You are free. You know, at times you only know your neighbourhoods. You go downtown, and all that movement fascinates you.
> (Inmate, S. Vicente Prison, former street child)

> You see, on the street there are some good things. We always have money in our pockets, we buy a lot of junk food and we cook on the beach. Life on the street can be easy. I have never tried to go back home. I like staying on the street because of the money, because of the food. Of course I had something to eat at home as well, but I love to cook my own meals, I love to be on the street, to eat hidden away… the street is good, better than my home, that's what I told my mother.
> (S. Vicente, street child, 13)

> I started to sleep on the street. I also liked to stay with my mother, but I just wanted to go onto the street. We were a group, together with ***, *** and the others. We did a lot of things together. We smoked. The street is good. You don't work. You can get your money, you can smoke, you are at ease, nobody is in charge, you can stay awake at night and go to sleep whenever you want.
> (Inmate, S. Vicente Prison, former street child)

Even when the boys indicated money as a crucial motivation for migrating to the street, what really seemed at stake was, in most cases, autonomy and greater freedom. These feelings of empowerment and liberty experienced when running away make street life extremely attractive. In several interviews, curiosity and the wish for independence were clearly pointed out as initial motivations for running away.

> I was born in São Vicente, in Bela Vista, and both my parents were born there as well. I ran away from home when I was 7 or 8 years old. My parents were living together at that time, and they both had a job. My father worked at the City Hall (even though he used to drink a lot) and my mother worked in a driving school. But I was always alone at home, and so I went to the city centre to look for some food. I started to sleep there, and then I was afraid to go back home, I was afraid they would beat me. I was fine with my parents, but I wanted to get

out, to see other things. At that time there was a neighbour of mine, a boy called Chiquinho, and he told me, "Let's go and ask for bread." And that's how it all started. I went onto the streets, I met other boys there, I started to do some bad things.

(Former street child, now inmate in outreach facility)

Actually, the street in Mindelo is a key space of socialization, opportunities and adventure for *any* child or adolescent. In the peripheral neighbourhoods of town, the outdoor space, the 'corner,' is often a meeting place, a playground, a place to talk, sit and drink. Especially in the late afternoon and the evening, the streets of these neighbourhoods are crowded with children playing, adolescents chatting and building relationships and old people sitting outside their houses watching the world go by. Due to increasing criminalization and stigmatization of the street within the last decade, negative attitudes towards the street are evident among middle and lower-middle class people. Children of these families are often 'confined' to their houses. Many people involved in social youth programmes claim that they have to bring people 'out of the street' and not let them hang around aimlessly all day. The street is increasingly demonized as a place of inactivity, of threat and crime, and portrayed as dangerous and morally ambiguous. As Tobias Hecht states, "the street is perceived as a threat to the moral values adults seek to inculcate in children (1998: 20)." Many children reported peer influence as a key element in the decision-making process leading them to the street. According to most interviewees, peers invited children to join "the group" on the street; those with more experience usually teach less-experienced children the basics of street life.

My father and mother raised me. They are both still alive. My father used to work at the harbour, and when he went to his workplace, he passed in front of the *praia de yacht*. It was there that I first met the other street children, and they were the ones who convinced me to move to the street. It is always like this. You meet a friend who tells you what life on the street is like. On the street you feel freer, you get the vice of money – you get to know money – you know many vices… I didn't want to go back home. And when they brought me by force, I didn't want to stay there, I ran away again. They used to beat me. But my mother was very worried when I ran away from home. When I went onto the street, I had no problem within my family. It is just that the others convinced me. They gave me some dollars, some clothes, I was feeling very strong.

(Former street child, now inmate in outreach facility)

The peer group is indeed a crucial aspect of kids living on the street. Though conflict and sporadic fights can break out now and then, having a group of friends and belonging to it is a key element of survival on the street. Friendship is considered one of the greatest appeals of street life by most former street youth:

> Since I left my home, the other boys in the street have been my family. And the friends you make on the street … that is good. The relationship you have with your friends on the street is something you cannot forget.
>
> (Inmate, S. Vicente Prison, former street child)

As Conticini and Hulme stress "issues such as the social bonding that children experience on the street, the formation of urban sub-cultures and the evolution of their self-perception are significant in understanding the attachment that children develop to the street and the difficulties they face in reintegrating into their former households (2007: 205)." In Mindelo, small groups of peers are often seen coordinating their efforts on the street, sharing and cooking food together, travelling together from one island to the other, and playing together as a group. As among the entire population of street children, there is a sort of loose, age hierarchy within these groups, expressed in terms of both respect and fear. Older street youth can be serious threats to younger street children. Theft and physical violence by "the older ones" are commonly reported by younger boys as one of the greatest dangers of the street, especially at night. As a result, younger children commonly keep their sleeping sites secret, or change them very frequently.

One of the strategies for overcoming this menace is for younger boys, during the initial stages of getting involved with the street, to engage in a close relationship with an older boy, who will 'protect' and educate them. This kind of relationship is frequently expressed in parental terms, like a father-son relationship. It is actually a symbiotic relationship, in which the younger street-child, more successful at raising money by begging due to his age, shares a part of his income in exchange for protection and expertise, enjoying some of the privileges the older boy has acquired during his career (better working places, more comfortable sleeping places, etc).

In conclusion, we should not overlook, that street-ward migration, like any form of child and adult migration, may succeed or fail. Surviving and living at ease on the street is a matter of acquired competence, of becoming 'streetwise.' In some cases, street-ward migrants simply fail, and go back to their families or other relatives, or prefer to stay in outreach facilities. Those who become streetwise (the success stories, so to speak) are quite at ease on the street and, despite the availability of alternatives, stubbornly refuse to leave the street, even though they may repeat that they absolutely want to leave.

The street has its perils, too. Increasingly, within the last decade in Cape Verde, crack addiction has brought several street boys to prison for petty crimes after turning sixteen. However, if able to avoid cocaine addiction and the legal system, street children often grow into working street youth, making a living in the informal street economy or in the informal economy at large. At this point, a clear distinction between former street children and low class youth from the city slums becomes impossible to make and practically irrelevant.

WHAT KIND OF AGENCY?

On the basis of key research findings from empirical literature on street children in Colombia, South Africa, Brazil, Honduras, Ethiopia, Sudan, Nepal and Indonesia, Veale, Taylor and Linehan (2000: 137) conclude that: "without discounting the deprivations and hazards that exist in the street, children often cite what can only be described as positive features of the street environment that offer solutions to problems in their lives at home." Considering street children as independent child migrants helps us to understand their moving to the street as an exercise of agency; moving from victimization to an actor-centred perspective allows us to better understand children's motivations for running away from their homes. Paralleling what can be claimed for most voluntary migrants, most children in Mindelo turn to the street to find a solution to basic problems; in general, they are looking for a better life, and trying to improve their living conditions. Given these former conditions, and from the main actors' perspectives, *the street appears as the solution, not the problem*.

Even though independent child migration has usually been understood within a children's-rights framework that pictures child migrants as vulnerable, passive, and exploited victims, dependent on adult migrants, recent investigation has shown that even though "children are often regarded as being unable or unlikely to be making independent decisions when they migrate, for a proportion of independent child migrants this is part of a set of the child's own objectives and strategies (Whitehead and Hashim 2005: 36; Iversen 2002)." As in other forms of independent child migration, mobility can be a process of liberation and empowerment for street children in Mindelo.

Dealing with categories of social actors such as working street children or independent child migrants, we are confronted with an ethical and theoretical conundrum stemming from regarding children as autonomous actors. It is their autonomy that is troubling, because it questions an iconic picture of the child as a dependent and vulnerable being, and therefore necessarily as a potential victim. But this is not the only issue. Once we acknowledge children as social agents, our concern is how to conceive children's agency, their capacity for self-reflection and their autonomy in decision-making, without portraying them as 'romantic heroes' and ignoring social and economic constraints that effectively limit their agency. In exploring the daily lives and the life trajectories of street children, it is important to find the right balance between examining social and economic constraints, individual suffering *and* agency. As Sam Punch underlined, it is crucial to recall that often migration is for children "a coping strategy to enable them to get by within the structural constraints that they face. They can assert their agency to a certain extent but it is within structural limits (2007: 15)."

Not to be caught between the victims-or-heroes Scylla and Charybdis, we have to either acknowledge child street migrants' agency as a 'tactical agency,' as Alcinda Honwana (2005) defines it, drawing upon Clausewitz's (1989) distinction between strategy and tactic, or as 'thin' agency, as Natasha Klocker proposes, referring to "decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives (2007: 85)." It is within this theoretical framework that we might better assess and acknowledge decision-making processes like those leading children and youth in Mindelo to engage in street-ward migration; in doing so, we recognize the value of their efforts to improve their lives as active social agents.

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