

**Pathways to Resilience IV: Global South Perspectives – June 14th-16th 2017
Cape Town, South Africa**

Is Resilience Futile? Adaptation in Contexts of Structural and Social Disadvantage

Abstract:

From my rights-based perspective, resilience is a useful concept for designing support services that enable street-connected children to gain access to their legal human rights, including their right to protection from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Resilience challenges two other perspectives that have dominated policy and programme approaches to children in street situations:

- A welfare-based one that seeks to rescue the child victim from the streets
- A reform-based one that aims to rehabilitate the delinquent street child.

I will draw on 25+ years of experience including: Local NGO and international network leadership positions; Academic research in social policy; and UN consultancies – to argue that resilience is a helpful tool for empowerment work with street-connected children and for challenging world views about ‘street children’.

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14/06/17

Is Resilience Futile for Street-connected Children?

To consider the question: Is Resilience futile? I am going to talk about street-connected children - looking at individual resilience, then structural inequalities and finally children's rights. I will scratch the surface and may be provocative but we have space for conversation and there's a workshop later today on 'Building with Bamboo' to dig deeper into street connections and resilience.

PART 1

We need street-connected children into the room, so I'm going to introduce Pedro. Now a 29 year-old, Pedro's lived in Brooklyn, New York since he was 16. He works in a pizza business, and is married with 2 young children. Pedro's Facebook identity is *Sonador Incredible* (Incredible Dreamer).

Pedro was 12 when we met. He had just moved into JUCONI House - a temporary residential home for boys in central Mexico who have lived on the streets. Pedro first slept on the streets of Puebla City when he was 9.

Years later he said this of his family backstory:

- *'So my mum decided to go off with this other man. And my dad stayed with us. He hit us a lot... I still have the marks. I was 5 or 6 when my mother left and I didn't see her again.... (Pedro found later that his dad had prevented her from any contact). When my grandmother died, my dad goes to the United States and we stay with a school teacher and she divided us up.... I think the agreement with my dad, was that*

she was going to look after all 4 of us [Pedro and his 3 brothers]. But this woman takes me and leaves me in a care home, another brother was left in another care home and another in another - and the oldest ran away...'

More shocks were to follow:

- *I lived for 2 years on the streets. I spent 3 years in a care home.... then in another care home for a few months [where he says children were sexually abused], and I left again and was in the street. I don't remember how long I lived in the street. Then they took me back to the care home... and when I behaved badly there [he means he ran away several times] they sent me to the Juvenile Detention Centre. And from there they brought me here.*

So.... by age 12, Pedro's contacts with all his family had been severed, he had run away from 2 care homes, spent 2 years surviving in the streets, lived in a juvenile detention centre, had fragmented primary schooling, and was embarking on his fifth institutional environment... And this is not an uncommon story in Latin America, Asia, Africa – the Global South. It also resonates with stories from the Global North -USA, Australia and Europe...

So Pablo came to JUCONI as a 'street child'. A horrible term, it's a stigmatising and unhelpful label. By the 2000s our sector was using 'child in a street situation' a better term that nevertheless objectifies and limits children to a single dimension - the street.

In 2011, we coined the term ‘street-connected children’, in a global study I led on behalf of the Consortium for Street Children for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. We defined a street-connected child as one *for whom the street is a central reference point – playing a significant role in their everyday lives and identities*. This saw the street as an important – but not the only – environment and drew attention to children’s relationships. It was a Paradigm Shift consistent with the New Sociology of Childhood – a school of thought that draws attention to children’s agency, their competences and their social context. So children like Pedro can be reframed from ‘street child’ to street-connected child – in which Pedro is social actor, capable of making relationships and using public space as one of several environments in which to survive and develop.

In stepping into JUCONI house Pedro transformed from ‘street child’ – victim to be rescued or delinquent to be reformed – into a child exposed to adverse situations.

JUCONI helped Pedro identify his resources and find out where he was headed. Together they built on his:

- Abilities to navigate difficult environments
- Connections with on-street employers, on-street friends and protectors
- Primary schooling and street work experience

And they aimed towards his ambition to reunite with his brothers

They tracked down family members:

- His older brother, living with relatives in New York

- His 2 younger brothers - in a Salvation Army home and a Catholic Don Bosco home – both in Puebla City. The brothers were allowed to meet but we were denied our request for them to move together into JUCONI – or for them to accept Pedro – who they saw as a destabilizing influence.

So Pedro prepared himself in JUCONI - completing secondary school and training to be a baker. By 16 he was impatient to join his older brother in the USA and with some misgivings the JUCONI team helped Pablo prepare for a potentially new life chapter. In a trip paid and organised by his uncle, Pablo made a hazardous, illegal 9-day trip – crossing the notorious Sonoran desert and the Rio Grande into Arizona and onward to New York. We held our collective breath - relieved by his reverse-charge phone call from New York.

When I asked him last week what had got him through - using a private message on Facebook - Pedro pointed to his conviction that he would reunite with his brothers, to supportive adults and to his 'incredible luck'. If that's not resilience, I don't know what is...

A mutual support network of JUCONI graduates is growing. Many have backstories of multiple losses and abuses + also of trusting relationships and friendships. Many have forged what we would call positive lives.

So my first answer to the question of Resilience and futility is that resilience may be the BEST RESOURCE street-connected children have available to them. And the BEST we can do from the sidelines may be to nurture that resource.

PART 2

At the same time – and this is the second part - **resilience cannot be – as some seem to believe - a solution to the multiple structural challenges faced by street-connected children.**

Pedro's home country of Mexico, is the 14th largest economy in the world, yet more than half the population lives below the poverty line. Over 200 years ago, Humboldt wrote '*Mexico is the country of inequality. Nowhere does there exist such a fearful difference in the distribution of fortune*'. Monterroso writing much more recently, in 2002, said something similar was still true: "*the unique, truly hyper-real characteristic of Mexico is its social inequality; the misery that marks the everyday life of the immense majority of Mexicans*'. Mexico - as other countries with high, entrenched income and wealth inequalities – is wealthier than ever and yet has alarmingly high levels of violence, corruption, mental illness, teenage pregnancies and a wealth of other social challenges.

Children born in poor urban neighbourhoods, like Pedro, grow up with poor infrastructure - roads, housing, street lighting, drainage, leisure facilities – inadequate or non-existent services such as schools, clinics, drinking water and security, and poor job prospects – and not just for themselves but for their children.

Promoting children's resilience in these conditions is no substitute for fairer income and wealth redistribution laws - and policies that promote children's well being:

- It is, surely, immoral and perverse - to maintain conditions that force children to face extreme adversity and then require

of children that they develop resilience in order to overcome them?

- And there is a considerable body of evidence from inequality research in both the Global North and the Global South that demonstrates investment in prevention and early interventions is cost effective for society.

Pedro's personal response to Mexico's inequalities was to take his opportunity to forge a life outside the country. He saved US\$5,000 for each of his younger brothers to make the illegal journey from Puebla to New York. He achieved his ambition to reunite his brothers – he found them jobs and they live in the same neighbourhood – they are making a life, albeit illegally and therefore precariously. As insurance, Pedro has bought a small plot of land on the outskirts of Puebla City as a bolthole.

PART 3

My third and final point is that, from a rights-based perspective, children's resilience must be recognised and nurtured in policies and interventions for street-connected children. Stefan Vanistendael wrote in 2014 '*The rights of the child and resilience are like two intertwined spirals, like the double helix of DNA*'. With the reframing of street children as children with street connections – and therefore with agency and competences – the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found they had a window to articulate this 'double helix' in the form of recommendations to Governments on how to fulfil the rights of street-connected children.

Over the last 3 years, we at Consortium for Street Children have partnered with the UN Committee to marshal the research evidence, consult experts and - in a unique exercise - consult with street-connected young people using participatory methods. Last year CSC brought together 370 street-connected young people from 32 countries in 7 consultation events around the world. Accompanied by representatives from 69 different NGOs, children took part in games and workshops to share their stories and put forward their recommendations to governments. They were helped with background papers produced by 84 pro bono researchers and lawyers. The UN Committee is about to issue its authoritative guidance in the form of a General Comment on Children in Street Situations.

The Comment is expected to affirm that a child rights approach emphasizes full respect for the autonomy of children in street situations. A rights-based approach celebrates their resilience and capabilities, recognizes their agency in decision-making and empowers them as socio-economic, political and cultural actors. It builds on their existing strengths and the positive contributions they make to their own survival and development and that of their peers, families and communities. It is also expected, perhaps most radically, to confirm children's right to freedom of association and assembly in public spaces.

This UN General Comment has transformational potential for the legal and policy landscape surrounding street-connected children, their families and communities. And I will be among those encouraging Governments to implement the General Comment

through laws and policies that reduce inequalities and actively promote street-connected children's rights.

Pedro on the other hand does not have a great deal of time for 'child rights'. He notes the irony that he won a prize for his knowledge of children's rights, in a competition in the Juvenile Detention Centre – where he was being held in direct violation of those rights... He adds: *'When I was in this Welfare home... well according to the Convention [on the Rights of the Child] we have the right to freedom, but we never went out [...] You're never allowed to go out when you're in Welfare.... and the thing was, like I wanted to search for my brothers (that's a right!), but they don't let you out, so that's why I escaped - time and again'*. His view is that children's rights look good on paper but aren't put into practice. So I am pretty sure Pedro will trust to his own resources, his own resilience. Pedro has taken some knocks since he reunited with his brothers, but has kept moving on and learned, while finding satisfaction in helping his brothers to overcome their own hurdles. I'm looking forward to seeing Pedro again – hopefully in New York next month – and to meeting his wife and children – of whom he is clearly deeply proud...