

Better deal for Uganda's street kids

In Kampala, hundreds of thousands of children are living on the streets, many of them working long hours as prostitutes or drug-runners just to survive.

Kamugisa Kolebu Tumusime left an abusive home when he was 11 and travelled to the Ugandan capital, where life took a decided turn for the worse. But then he discovered an organisation that helped him to build a 'normal life'

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Two boys play cards at the rehabilitation centre in Kampala. Photograph: Nadia Strakova

I did not have a happy childhood. My father died while I was still a boy and my stepfather had little affection for me. My mom did not compensate for this. She often beat me, usually after a tirade from her new husband set off by whatever it was he disliked about me.

At the age of 11, when I had had enough, I ran away from home. I left my native village of Kiryolo in northern Uganda and headed for the usual destination of those less privileged seeking better fortunes: the capital city, Kampala. But it did not take me long to realise that life there would not be any easier.

It was difficult for me to find a job, because I was new in town. After some searching I finally started making a living as a porter, earning about 2,000 shillings [\$1] on a good day. This was enough to buy three meals a day and even save a little bit of money for worse times.

I was sleeping outside under a veranda and other street dwellers would often steal my savings during the night. Further harassment came from the police. They arrested me several times, only releasing me after a night in custody.

But then my life turned around. Some of the friendlier people I had met told me about an organisation that helped children, providing them with free shelter and food. I had to go and see for myself.

There I met Godfrey Musisi, a social worker who tried to take me back home to Palissa. But when we got there my mother explained her predicament to Godfrey, telling him that her first husband had passed away and she could not keep me at home because her current husband did not consider me as his child. She pleaded with him to continue supporting me.

And so it was that I stayed with Kids in Need. They sent me to primary school for the first time in my life. I was 14 years old. They also took care of the all the costs of my schooling, costs that make education unattainable for many poor Ugandan children.

I started in grade two and kept going for three more years before I dropped out, feeling uncomfortable among my much younger classmates. Instead, I asked to be transferred onto a vocational training programme with the aim of becoming a motorcycle repair mechanic. The organisation promised to make it possible if I could find a relative in Kampala who would agree to at least partially support me with accommodation and food.

Luckily for me, my older brother, a military man serving in barracks in Kampala, was willing to let me stay there. A garage agreed to take me under its wing. Unlike in school, where my performance was very poor, in the garage I have learned fast.

I even have my own customers. I gave them my telephone number when they came to the repair shop and told them that if they get stuck somewhere with their motorbike, they can call me and I will come and repair it. I have been learning for about a year and a half now. Once I master the skills my ambition is to set up my own garage. Already, I can earn as much as 90,000 shillings [\$46] in a good month as I am also getting paid for my work under the training scheme.

When I'm not working I like to sleep or watch football on TV. Like most Ugandans, I religiously follow the English premiership games, especially those featuring London's Arsenal. Who knows, you might even come across my yet-to-be Gunners' Garage in Kampala one day.

- Kamugisa Kolebu Tumusime was speaking to Pavel Vondra and Nadia Strakova. You can see video footage of the boys' rehabilitation centre in Uganda [here](#).

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn5P3g1gzB4>