

The Role of Networks of Relations among Street Children in Kenya: Evidence from Eldoret Municipality

Peter Oino¹, Samwel Auya²

¹M.A. School of Arts and Social Sciences Egerton University
Department of Peace, Security and Social Studies
P.O. Box 536, Egerton

²Assistant Lecturer, Mount Kenya University (Nairobi Campus)
Department of Economics and Development studies
P.O Box 35818- 00200 Nairobi, Kenya

Abstract: *The menace of street children has not only attracted public concern but has also become a matter of priority to governments, non-governmental organizations and the community at large. However, their attempts to alleviate the street children phenomenon have remained fruitless due to the complex network structures that street children develop on the streets. This partly explains why most of the existing interventions towards street children either fail or have little impact than intended. It is within this background that this paper examines the networks that exist among street children. The paper sheds light on how social relationships, inter and intra base relationships, leadership and perceived opportunities enhance street children networks. The authors argue that most children who are coming into the streets are not ignorant of what they will meet, they access information about the outside world through their social networks. Street children's networks, which they create through their interactions, are important for their continued survival on the streets. The establish networks help the children to be strongly connected to their social identity, feelings of self-worth and self-confidence on the streets. Thus, making it difficult for interventions to penetrate and succeed in removing them from the streets. The paper recommends that for interventions targeting street children to succeed, they need to understand the impact and extent to which the networks street children create, guarantee them continued stay on the streets and even a return to the streets after reintegration. Interventions also need to understand the perceived benefits that motivate street children to maintain links among themselves, even after reintegration and therefore, devise appropriate strategies that can help to remove them successfully from the streets.*

Keywords: Networks of Relations, Street Children, Eldoret Municipality, Kenya

1. Introduction

Street children phenomenon is a problem of both developed and developing countries, but is more prevalent in the poor nations of Latin America, Asia and Africa (LeRoux, 1996). More than 650 million, of the world's 1.2 billion people living in poverty are children (Lindenberg et al. 2001). There is accumulated evidence that children move frequently on and off the streets and that the street does not represent the sum total of their social networks or experiences. Various studies have estimated the number of street children in different countries in the world. For instance, in Ethiopia, Non Governmental Organisations estimated that there are nearly 600,000 street children and 100,000 of these in Addis Ababa (IRIN, 2004). Around one million children are believed to be on the streets of Egypt. Most of them are in Cairo and Alexandria (UNICEF, 2005).

The Indian Embassy has estimated that there are 314,700 street children in metros such as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Kanpur, Bangalore and Hyderabad and around 100,000 in Delhi alone (Railway Children, 2006). There are an estimated 10,000-12,000 homeless children in South Africa (Save the Children, 2005), while in Kenya, there are 250,000-300,000 children living and working on the streets with more than 60,000 of them in Nairobi (IRIN, 2007). These studies have further indicated that children find their way to the streets because of poverty, overcrowding, abuse, neglect, family disintegration and HIV/AIDS. Moreover, De Moura, (2002), notes that social inequalities and deprivation

exhibited in contemporary societies, results to the presence of vast numbers of children living and working in the streets in unsupervised and unprotected situations.

According to Kopoka, (2002), poverty is a major cause of street children. Children are being forced to work on the streets to support themselves and their families. In addition, it is poverty that is causing families to break up with parents being unable to support their children. Poverty and the gradual disintegration of the traditional family network system have contributed negatively to the development of the child. In the continent of Africa, civil and ethnic strife have placed children in extremely vulnerable situations, where hundreds of thousands have been killed, maimed, orphaned or displaced (Veale & Dona, 2003). Furthermore, poverty in childhood is a root cause of poverty in adulthood. Impoverished children often grow up to be poor parents who in turn bring up their own children in poverty (UNICEF, 2005). This is also in agreement with what (Lewis, 1969) says that once the culture of poverty comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effects on children. By the time slum children are age six or seven, they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture. They are not psychologically geared to take full advantage of changing conditions or increased opportunities, which may occur in their lifetime.

In Africa, street children are relatively a recent phenomenon that reflects the patterns of urbanization and advent of

capital economy in the early twentieth century (Kopoka, 2000; Sorre, 2009). This has resulted to increased economic problems, political changes, civil unrest, natural disasters, increasing family separations and conflicts. The influx of street children in urban centers of Kenya has been attributed to the disintegration of the family institution. According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 16.3), the family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and State. This means that the family institution has a powerful impact on the lives and identities of individuals. The family particularly plays a major role on the survival and development of children in the society.

The explanations behind decline in family influence and control over its members include, breakdown of the extended family, stresses on the nuclear family, the failing of intimate love, the changing roles of women and sexual permissiveness, among others (Eitzen, et al, 2009; Sorre & Oino, 2013). This implies that the diminished role of the family system is caused by the failure of the kinship system to provide support for family members in distress. Thus, when the children do not have someone to take care of them (or assume parental responsibilities), the streets become one of the alternative sources for survival. Once on the streets, street children remain disconnected with their families for some period of time and others can remain disconnected with their families forever (Sorre, 2009). While on the Streets Street remain united and socially organized. According to Whyte, (1955), in his street corners society study, he demonstrated that a poor community (street children) need not be socially disorganized. He found that street gangs were socially organized in their daily activities; they divide up the various tasks among themselves and were guided by norms and regulations they created for themselves.

Evidence shows that growing up in the context of constant change and contradiction can for some children be a source of strength (Boyden, 2003). Therefore, street children could be said to be one category of children that adapt with contradictions in their lives. He further observes that street children operate within the structures they create on the streets, which promote resilience and teach them how to solve problems and successfully handle challenges in life. Boakye-Boaten, (2008) notes that when the children are on their own, they rely on their own established networks on the streets for survival. Street lifestyle and networks develop a sub-culture that provides both reference group and collective identity (Awad, 2002; Beazley, 2003,). Members of a sub-culture draw newcomers into the fold, teach them survival skills and socialize them.

These children depend less on their families or other people who they consider strangers and cannot share their experiences. Instead, they rely more on the meaningful ties they have established within their groups or gangs (Ochola, 1999). According to Boakye- Boaten, (2008), street children in Ghana, like in other developing countries, live in peer groups, and have a strict enforcement of gender and age differentiations, and each group develop strict codes of conduct and engagement.

According to Ayuku, (2005), street children organize their psychosocial attributes primarily within the framework of the realities available to them and the supports existing in those realities. They tend to seek constructive adaptive patterns even though; their own lives have been marred by loss, abuse and exploitation. The street children have formed strong supportive ties and caring relationships and they cope actively with their lives on the streets rather than homes or institutional environments.

Like in many developing countries, street children are one of the most serious urban social problems facing Kenya today. The phenomenon of street children has not only attracted public concern but has also become a matter of priority to governments as well as national and international organizations (Panter-Brick, 2003). However, their attempts to alleviate the street children phenomenon have remained futile due to the complex network structures that they develop on the streets. This partly explains why most of the existing interventions towards street children either fail or have little impact than intended. It is within this background that this paper seeks to examine the networks of relations that exist among street children, with a particular interest in Eldoret Municipality of Kenya.

2. Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Eldoret Municipality. The town is the fastest growing commercial hub in Western Kenya. It is well interlinked with roads, railway and air transport network. It has an expansive agricultural production that offers opportunities for a number of economic activities. Eldoret town is the head quarter of Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift Region of Rift Valley province. The County shares common borders with Trans Nzoia County to the North, Elgeyo-Marakwet County to the East, Baringo County to the South East, Kericho County to the South, Nandi County to the South West and Kakamega County to the North West. The County has a total area of 3,327.8km² (Uasin Gishu District Information Office, 2011). The authors' focus on Eldoret Municipality is based on the fact that it is a politically hot spot town, and has an ever growing number of street children attributed to many factors including poverty, HIV/AIDS, tribal clashes/wars, emergence and expansion of low income estates (slums), and also acts as a strategic meeting point for children from different parts of the country. The study employed ethnographic research design. According to Bhattacharjee, (2012), research design is a comprehensive plan for data collection in an empirical research. It is a 'blueprint' for empirical research aimed at answering specific research questions or testing specific hypotheses. Ethnographic research design is commonly used in studies dealing with network analysis or organization structures. Bowling, (1997), defines ethnography as the study of people in their natural settings: a descriptive account of social life and culture in a defined social system, based on qualitative methods (like detailed observation, unstructured interviews, and analysis of document). Through observation for instance, ethnographic design was used to examine the social roles and networks that helped in understanding the overall networks of relations among street children in the Municipality.

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Entry into Street Life

Street children gain entry into the streets through social links. The decision of joining street life is a physical, psychological and social process and leaving home is habitually a gradual process. The focus of this paper was to establish the underlying social processes involved. According to Veale, et al, (2000), for street children to decide to move away from home to live on the streets, is a conscious and a rational act where the action is a solution to a problem, rather than a problem in itself. For that reason, the child acts rationally in order to satisfy his/her 'needs' and achieve goals. However, from the authors' point of view, the decision made to go into the streets may not necessarily be beneficial in view of the fact that the choices made are perceived to be the best alternatives. One of the aspects was to understand the social factors on the streets that attract children and sustain them to stay there despite the difficulties involved in living on the streets. The authors therefore, started by asking the respondents how they got into the streets of Eldoret town. Table 1 below summarizes their responses.

Table 1: Who introduced respondents to street life?

| Who introduced you to the streets? | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| Friends from the base I live in | 70 | 47 |
| My own decision | 20 | 13.3 |
| My cousin | 23 | 15.3 |
| My brother/sister | 10 | 6.7 |
| My parents | 14 | 9.3 |
| I found myself on the streets/dumped/abandoned | 13 | 8.7 |
| Total | 150 | 100 |

Analysis in Table 1 above indicates that majority 70(37%) of the respondents were brought to the streets by friends from their current base who had a prior experience on the streets. They were brought by children from their home villages who they used to interact with before they came to the streets. When their friends ran away from home to the streets, they created a social network, whereby whenever they used to visit their parents at home, they could bring more children to the streets. This means that the networks street children create when they are in their home village help them recruit more children into the streets. For those children who experience various problems such as food shortage in their homes, are easily convinced to join streets life. This also implies that peer influence through networks and partly poverty are some of the motivating factors for street children in the Municipality. The family support system inherent today is in favor of individual parenting. As such, when the family is not able to provide for the children, there is no one else to support them. This is unlike in the past where the African traditional extended family system gave support to the children in case the biological parent was not able and such support reduced the rate of child vulnerability and destitution (Sorre & Oino, 2013). Once they arrive on the streets through their social networks, street children are able to develop survival mechanisms that sustain their lives in the absence of a parent figure.

Some respondents said that they were brought to the streets by their friends who were earlier reintegrated with their families by NGOs. The street children were told about street life by their friends. One street boy narrated that:

...I had stayed on the streets for six years without seeing my family in Lodwar. One day social workers from one organization working with street children in Eldoret town visited me at Jua Kali base and asked me if I wanted to be out of the streets. They told me that if I want to be taken home I should start visiting their centre for a period of one month. When I started visiting I was told to stop sniffing glue and using other drugs before they reintegrate me with my family. I accepted but in my mind I just wanted to go and visit my parents and again come back to continue with my street life. After one month we boarded Eldoret Express bus and traveled to Lodwar and I was re-united with my family. While at home the situation that had made me run away from home was still the same [there was no food and my mother was staying alone with my siblings]. After staying in my home for two weeks life was difficult for me and I decided to come back to Eldoret town. I met Joseph who is my cousin whom I had shared with how life was better on the streets than home. He was willing to accompany me to Eldoret town. We traveled together to Eldoret town and to date we are living together in the same base (Street boy, 17 years).

From the above findings, it is evident that social networks play a major role in attracting more children into street life. It also implies that some street children are better nourished when they are on the streets than when they are in their homes. This is due to the survival strategies they have employed on the streets, donations from well-wishers and churches. Furthermore, deteriorated family living conditions may not favour the stay of children at home once they have been reintegrated by agencies working with street children. These agencies also address the perceived needs of street children rather than felt needs hence, end-up not addressing the phenomenon of street children adequately.

Thirteen percent (13%) of the children came by themselves to the streets. This category of respondents said that it was their own decision or desire to come into the streets as an alternative to the life they were leading in their homes. Fifteen percent (15%) were brought to the streets by close relatives such as cousins [peers] who were still living on the streets. This also implies that the relatives of the respondents had prior experience about street life, which they presumed to have been better [availability of money, food, clothes, jobs and freedom] compared to the live they were leading in their homes before they were influenced to join street life. Six percent (6%) of the respondents were brought to the streets by their siblings who had been on the streets and introduced them into real street life events.

From the above discussions, most children who are coming into the streets are not ignorant of what they will meet when they go to live on the streets. Children access information about the outside world through social networks they create. Those children living in the urban settlements in the Municipality such as low income estates (slums) such as Langas, Kipkaren, huruma, Kamukunji and Hillschool may have first had contact with street children before they made

the decision to move away from home into the streets. Some may have known other children who had left home such as a relative, a friend or a neighbor and may be lured by anecdotes from the streets.

4. Membership on the Streets/Bases

The study found that for a street child to be recognized by other street children, he/she has to be affiliated to a particular base. On arrival to the streets, street children gain entry into a base through recruitment and have to meet certain requirements such as age, gender and perform certain activities they are told before acquiring full membership in a base. Once street children arrive into the streets, they have to adhere to the first instructions they are given by the leader to avoid the risk of not being accepted into the group (base). The first entry into the streets is a probation period marked with gradual learning of the expectations of the street subculture (social norms/rules). A new street child is expected to learn attitudes, norms, values and forms of communication within the base.

It is also apparent from the study that there exists a strong network among street children, which enhances communication between bases. As a result, a street child who has misbehaved in one base will not be accepted in another base since bases have a network of communication and they know the profile of every street child. The new entrants into the streets are prone to initial harassment and abuse, in preparation for hard life they are going to experience on the streets. In consequence, the initial preparation, support and exposure to hard challenges are extremely vital for their early success in the streets.

5. Leadership on the Streets

Street children in Eldoret Municipality live in 'bases'. A base is a 'household' like structure made up of street children of between 20 and 250 members that provide a household-like environment for members (street children) who live on the streets. The study was interested in understanding if street children have informal leadership structure that help to guide them on their operations while on the streets. The respondents were therefore, asked if there was a leader in their base, 128(85%) of the respondents said that they have a base leader while 22(15%) said that they don't have a leader. One of the reasons for not having a leader in their base is that the occupants and the base are still new and are acquainting themselves with street life and have not organized themselves to choose a leader.

Observation by the study indicates that bases have a leadership structure. A base leader is a reference point and automatically assumes the responsibility of protecting the group members. Base leaders act as a source of authority, command and acts as conflict mediators helping street children in solving disputes among themselves or with others. Each base controls a specific area in the municipality, and during the night street children have their own place where to sleep, where they have developed tent like structures with old rags, polythene papers and clothes for shelter. However, relationships between different groups can be unstable and occasionally violent for example, when they are scrambling for scarce resources. The study also

established that a base leader does not work alone in protecting the members of the base. It was found that the base leaders appoint a team of leaders who help them in enhancing governance among members of the base. When asked about the benefits of team leaders, the respondents said that team leaders act as a point of reference (gatekeepers) in the sections they are leading. In collaboration with the base leader they help in addressing the needs of street children such as sickness by taking them to hospital. Team leaders are the beneficiaries of tributes the street children contribute to the leaders. This is illustrated diagrammatically by Figure 1 below.

(Source: Field work, 2012)

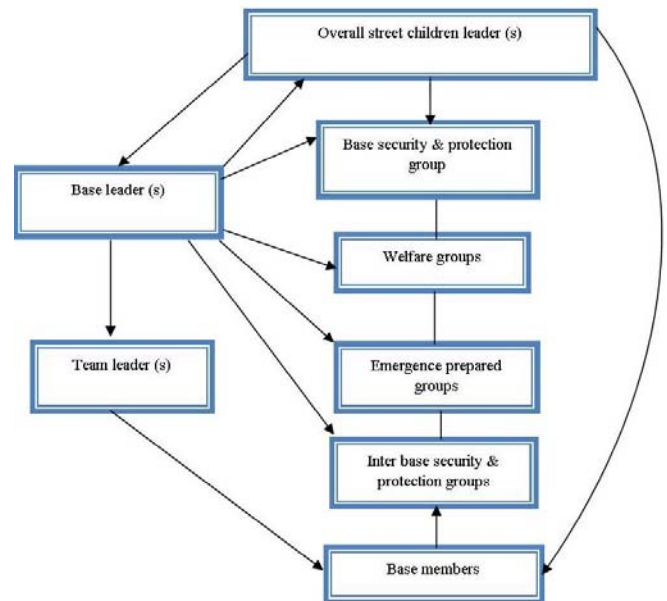


Figure 1: Informal leadership structure among street children in Eldoret Municipality

Figure 1 above shows that leaders of street children coordinate members [street children] to participate on matters relevant to their existence on the streets. With the guidance from the overall leader, team leaders establish sub-groups which help in addressing welfare related issues among street children which include; food, shelter, health and burials. They also form sub-groups that deal with emergencies such as accidents, floods, attacks by strangers and sickness. The base security and protection group ensures that members within the base are protected against external invasion and also maintain polity and order among themselves. Finally, inter-base security and protection group draws its members from all bases which include base leaders, team leaders and representatives from the members of the bases. The overall leader(s) of street children leads this group. This group ensures that members of all bases are guaranteed security and protection. The group also gives guidelines on how street children can carry themselves within and outside their bases.

In conclusion, leadership among street children is vital for their survival on the streets. It gives guidance and direction to its members. In addition, it defines networks of relationships inter and intra base interactions.

6. Inter and Intra Base Relationships

Street children are human beings. As such, they need social identity, love, social, emotional, and moral support for them to survive while on the streets. The study revealed that street children make friends within and outside their base, which help them to strengthen inter and intra relationships among themselves. Friendship among the respondents was found to encourage social bonding among members of the group. It also increased harmony, solidarity and their chances of survival on the streets. The study found that street children start making new friends from the time they arrive on the streets and some relationships end up as couples. The respondents were also asked the benefits they get from making friends on the streets. They said that there is exchange of information so that one is able to learn how to move around within and outside the base and maintenance of security and protection against external invasion. In addition, they share goods, money, food, shelter and other possessions like clothes and glue. For instance, one boy from Juma Haji base said that:

...Mimi sijawahi lala njaa kwa sababu, wakati ninasaka na nikose chakula ama pesa ya kununua chakula, rafiki yangu huwa ananipatia. Na yeye pia akikosa mimi ninampatia na hivyo ndivyo tunaishi (Street boy, 11 years). (Meaning, I have never slept hungry. When I am rummaging around and fail to get food or money to buy food, my friend gives me and when he also lacks I also give him. That is how we live here.)

This means that street children care for each other and they practice generalized reciprocity for them to survive on the streets. Similar to the above, in Accra, Mizen et al, (2010) describes friendships on the street as informal networks suited to informal urban living, finding the notion of non-monetary exchange an expressive form of reciprocity largely devoid of market transactions whereby one child relates to others in terms of a complex of asking, giving and receiving as intrinsic to the act of making friends on the streets.

The respondents who had friends on the streets were further asked where they make friends from. Of the 142 respondents who answered this question, majority 83(58%) of them made friends within and outside their base. This category of respondents said that for them to increase the chance of survival on the streets, they need friends from their base and from other bases within the Municipality. This helps them to maintain networks of relationships among themselves through inter and intra-base relationships. However, the study noted that street children are selective in terms of who they bond with on the streets. It was evident that friendship was determined by age, activities done by an individual in a particular base for example engaging in petty crimes.

It was also established that the interaction with members from other bases guaranteed street children security and protection in case of danger, ill health, and aggression from the public, police, and attack by big boys from other bases or strangers. Such friendships increased social bonding and protection among street children. Inter base relationships also help them to discover new opportunities available in the town and in NGOs, rehabilitation centers and homes dealing with street children. This means that as much as street

children develop positive adaptation on the streets, there will reach a time when they consider going home or stop living on the streets.

The study established that through inter and intra relationships, street children become resilient to every situation on the streets as they are prone to violence and hardship. Moreover, they make independent decisions and they are able to negotiate successfully for basic necessities. These include food, shelter and clothing for their own survival. However, at some point while pursuing their lives on the streets, some happenings such as fights with friends, rape, continuous exploitation and harassment from their friends and authorities such as the police and the general public may lead to isolation. A situation that leads to disillusion and street children become socially, emotionally and physically strained. At this particular point, street children overwhelmed with this situation, become withdrawn and decide to be out of the streets. They therefore, decide to seek the help of a charity or an NGO to reintegrate or repatriate them to their families.

The study found that 35(25%) of the respondents made friends from other bases only. They claimed that it was imperative for them to have friends from other base who they can share common goals, do things together and act as a linkage for new opportunities. Most of the respondents in this category were older street children who have lived on the streets for a long time and understand the Municipality better than those who came recently, while 24(17%) of the respondents made friends from their base only. The study established that these category of respondents depended on the relationships between members of their base without extending their linkage to other bases. Street children are able to make friends quickly because they value their freedom to interact with others and the ability to make their own choices.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that every street child need friends and create relationships from the base or other bases for him/her to pursue street life. These relationships bestow a sense of belonging and help one to be socialized into the street culture [within the base] as Beazley, (2003) asserts, the socialization to the sub-culture (street culture) helps a street child re-define negative self-concepts by offering a collective identity and a reference group from which to develop a new individual identity and face the outside world. Street children through their base leaders organize inter-base events/activities that enhance social interaction among street children from different bases. Data collected from base leaders who were key informants through direct observation, indicate that street children participate in sporting activities such as football, volley ball and athletics. Such activities help the street children to interact, socialize and share their problems together thus, create harmony and solidarity among themselves.

Street children have strong networks among themselves and the agencies working for them. This enables them to access information about and utilization of social services offered in these institutions. The street children leaders act as a link between them and organization providing services. The researcher observed that street children leaders visit these organizations in the Municipality to inquire the new

opportunities available for their colleagues on the streets. This is what one child protection worker in a rehabilitation centre had to say:

...Most street children know the opportunities available for them in every organization working with street children. They get the information through us whenever we visit their bases or their base leaders come by themselves to our centre to inquire what is available for them....The street children know which centre offer food.....medical support....reintegration etc. Even if an organization started yesterday they will know and they will come. They therefore, exploit every opportunity they get (NGO Child Protection Worker; Female, 41 years, 2012).

From the above findings, street children have strong networks and this is important for their continued survival on the streets. Street children also plan and organize activities such as burials together. In addition, they have merry go rounds where they contribute towards a certain activity. Street children have a kitty for burials, psychosocial and medical support, purchase of recreational items such as volleyballs and footballs and also for initiation (circumcision) of members. Inter-base relations help the children to be strongly connected to their social identity and feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

The established networks of relationships among street children ensure that the new recruits to the base are taken through the system. As Ennew, (1994) notes, in the absence of parents, street children bring each other up and 'develop supportive networks, coping strategies and meaningful relationships outside adult supervision and control. For new arrivals of children on the streets of Eldoret Municipality, networks guarantee them peer support and new learnt survival skills in addition to a collective identity that assists them in their construction of a new positive self-esteem and personality. Similar to this study, (Obioha, 2004), asserts that peer groups are the functioning instruments for voluntary recruitment of children on the streets.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

From the foregoing discussion, the decision of joining street life by children is a physical, psychological and social process. Street children gain entry into the streets through the networks of relations they have established through friends, themselves, and close relatives. Informal leadership among street children is vital for their survival on the streets. Polity and order among street children is maintained by norms and rules that brings order by guarding against unwanted behaviors and conducts among its members. The major pull factor for street children to join the street is the strong networks of relations they have created with other street children on the street that guarantee their own survival when they arrive on the streets. Street children create inter and intra base relationships among themselves that enable them to maintain their networks and increasing their bonding. However, the networks become an obstacle to interventions that covet to remove street children as they [interventions] act contrary to their wishes. When street children are reintegrated with their families, they maintain links with base leaders/street children and other networks they created while on the streets. This ensures regular communication and whenever the conditions at home

become unbearable, they again link with them on the streets that facilitate their return to the streets hence the recurrence of the street children phenomenon. As such, the interventions fail to alleviate the problem. The paper recommends that interventions need to devise new strategies to counteract the networks that act as an impediment to the removal of street children from the streets.

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Samwel Auya holds a Master of Philosophy Degree in Sociology and Bachelors of Arts in Sociology from Moi University. He has taught at Eldoret Polytechnic, African Institute of Research and Development Studies, and Moi University. He is currently a lecturer at Jomo Kenya University of Agriculture and Technology's Zetech Centre, part time lecturer at Maasai Mara University and Mount Kenya University Nairobi Campus. Mr. Auya has participated in preparing four e-Learning modules (Human Rights and Development, Population and Development, Rural Urban Development, and Development Organizations) for Mount Kenya University and in preparing Teacher's Hand in Essentials for Social Policy Administration for Kenya Institute of Education (KIE). He is the co-founder (2011) and Programme Coordinator of Genesis of Development Foundation.

Author Profile



Mr Peter Oino holds a Master of Arts in sociology (Community Development & Proj. Mngt) (Egerton University), A Diploma in Project management (KIM) and a Bachelors of Arts Degree in Anthropology (Moi University). He works in Ex-street Children

Community Organization as a Programme Officer and has several years working with rural and urban vulnerable communities. He is the founder (2011) and Programme Director of Genesis of Development Foundation. GDF is a national NGO that deals with vulnerable groups (children, Women and Youths) in the community. Besides charity work, he also enjoys doing research and publishing.