Living on the Margin of Life: The Condition of Street Children During Covid-19 Outbreak in Three Selected Towns of SNNPR (Sodo, Jinka, and Arbaminch)

Shimelis Kassa *  
Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social science and Humanities, Arbaminch University, Ethiopia

Belayneh Muche  
Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social science and Humanities, Arbaminch University, Ethiopia

Abstract: 

The objective of this study is to assess the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on street children, their awareness about COVID-19 transmission and support of government to street children in three selected towns of SNNPR (Jinka, Arbaminch, and Sodo). To achieve these objectives, concurrent mixed research designs were employed. To identify respondents, both convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. As instruments of data collection; interview schedules, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews were used. Finally, data were analyzed and interpreted using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The finding of the study depicted that the outbreak of COVID-19 worsen the social and economic problem of street children. Despite the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, no permanent support was given to the children both by the government and charity organizations. Moreover, the finding showed that street children suffer from various problems like lack of basic needs, depression and deprivation of work opportunity. Thus, holistic intervention should be used to address various problems that street children faced.

Keywords: street children, covid-19, pandemic, jinka, arbaminch, sodo.

Introduction

The problem of street children is a worldwide phenomenon. Many capitals and urban centers of the world have become a haven of survival for many children in distress (Boakye, 2008). They are among the most visible of all children, living and working on the streets and squares of cities all over the world. Yet, they are also among the most invisible children: the hardest to reach with vital services like education and health care, and the most difficult to protect (UNICEF, 2006).

Their problem is well documented in Latin America and South-East Asia. However, in Africa, it is a comparatively new phenomenon (Ochola & Dzikus, 2000). But, now streetism is a growing problem in most African cities and towns. Hence, the problem requires urgent attention as it threatens the very fabric of society (Kopaka, 2000).

Although the phenomenon of street children is a global one, Latin American, Asian, and African countries are especially affected by the problem.
more than any other part of the world. In this regard, a study on street children of Accra by Boakye (2008) revealed that the condition of children living and working on the streets of most urban areas in Africa has assumed problematic dimensions because many people are beginning to identify with the situation as needing urgent and pragmatic attention. In Ethiopia, the phenomenon of street children has also become a critical social problem in most cities and towns (Azmeraw, 2015).

Given, the incidences of COVID-19 in Ethiopia that affect the world economy in general and Ethiopia, in particular, worsen their situation (WHO, 2020). The incidence of COVID-19 in the country changes their life from bad to worse. In this regard, the CSC report revealed that children in street situations are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 because many are homeless or living in informal settlements (CSC, 2020a). More importantly, not only street children, all children of all ages in all countries, are being affected by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good (UN, 2020). The OECD report also reveals, that the COVID-19 pandemic is harming the health, social and material well-being of children worldwide, with the poorest children, including homeless children in detention, hit hardest. The impacts of the pandemic hit some groups of children harder than others. These groups of vulnerable children include children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children in out-home care, children in detention, and also refugee children, and children at risk of child labor (OECD, 2020). Thus, the protection of children in general and street children, in particular, is crucial to their survival, health, and wellbeing. Hence, this study assesses the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on street children, their awareness about Covid-19 transmission, symptoms & protection mechanism as well as support of government for street children in three selected towns of SNNPR.

Materials and Methods
Research design
For this study, mixed research design was used. Mixed research methods are formally defined as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques intending to minimize the weakness of a single method (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Therefore, support of government for the street was approached qualitatively whereas socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 and awareness about COVID-19 were approached both quantitatively and qualitatively. Among different types of mixed research design, the concurrent design was used for this study. In concurrent research, design researcher converges quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research problem. In this design, the investigator collects both forms of data at the same time during the study and then integrates the information into the interpretation of the overall results (Creswell, 2003).

Instruments of Data Gathering
To ensure the reliability of the finding, this study utilized different but interrelated tools to collect data from various sources. To collect data from the participants’ interview schedule, in-depth interview, FGD and key informant interview were employed.

Interview schedule
An interview schedule was used with the street children to obtain information concerning, their awareness of COVID-19 and the impacts of COVID-19 on their socio-economic activity. Street children below the age of nine were not included in the interview schedule because the researchers believe that street children’s below the mentioned age are not matured enough to understand express the phenomenon. This method helps the researchers to make a wider size of data. Under this method, the enumerators are appointed and given training. They are provided with schedules containing relevant questions. These enumerators go to respondents with these schedules. Data are collected by filling up the schedules by enumerators based on
replies given by respondents. In the three towns interview schedule was conducted with 170 street children. This method of data collection is very much like the collection of data through a questionnaire, with little difference which lies in the fact that schedules (proforma containing a set of questions) are being filled in by the enumerators who are specially appointed for this purpose (Kothari, 2004).

**In-depth interview**

Secondly, in-depth interview was used with some selected street children concerning the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on their life, their awareness about COVID-19 pandemic and about supports they receive from the government during the COVID-19 outbreak. Respondents of in-depth interviews were selected based on their age. Children above 12 years were selected for in-depth interviews purposefully because the researchers believe that those children above-mentioned age are matured enough to express the phenomenon under investigation. This instrument of data collection is very important in providing opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. As a result, it helps the researchers to give freedom to informants by asking the whole life story to create trust in due course of communication and it provides the researchers to ask for further clarification from the informants during face-to-face contact. From the three towns, a total of four children were interviewed, two from Sodo and two from Arbainch and Jinka towns respectively.

**Focus Group Discussion**

FGD was conducted with some selected street children. The informants of FGD were selected based on their age. Therefore, street children between the ages of 12-17 were selected by the researchers intentionally. Street children below the age criteria were excluded because of their immaturity to understand and express the phenomenon. The FGD was used to triangulate information obtained from the rest of data gathering instruments. The purpose of having focus group discussions is to generate new information, clarify further points of detail, validate information derived through other methods, and build consensus between group members. From the three towns, a total of three Focus Group discussions were conducted. That means one FGD from each town.

**Key informant interview**

Fourthly, key informant interviews were conducted with government officials who have a close relation to the issue in the study area like officials from the women and children office and officials from BOLSA about, the efforts made by the government to support street children during COVID-19 outbreak and the impacts of COVID-19 on the socio-economic activity of street children. This tool of data gathering helps the researchers to ask for further clarification from the informant during the period of an interview about the phenomenon under investigation. One person from BoLSA and one person from the Office of Women and Children were interviewed from each town. The reason why the researchers interviewed only one person from each office was that we acquired sufficient data or because of saturation of required information. Hence, a total of six people were interviewed from the three towns.

**Sampling size and sampling Techniques**

It was not easy to find an accurate number of street children from which the researchers could select a proper scientific sample by random method because exact number of statistical data is unavailable in the study area. Therefore, the selection of sample for this study was based on non-random sampling which are conveniences and purposive sampling techniques. These procedures are an acceptable method of gathering data in situations where it is difficult to construct a sampling frame that contains a complete list of all individuals. The study particularly employed a convenience sampling technique for selecting samples for the interview schedule because most of the target population is haphazardly located. The researchers were go to all places in the towns where street children are known to live or live in high concentrations to collect data early in the morning and at night in their sleeping places.
The main objective of using convenience sampling technique for interview schedule was only to identify street children. After identification, the informants of the finding were selected through purposive sampling based on their age. Those street children below 9 years old were excluded because of their immaturity to understand and express the phenomenon. The decision was made by the researchers because in purposeful sampling the researcher has power to put criteria to select the participants. In purposeful sampling researcher selects a participant according to the needs of the study by any restrictions placed upon his observations. Purposive sampling relies on the judgment of the researcher when it comes to selecting the units (Imelda, 1997). The researchers also used purposive sampling techniques for participants of in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and key informants. Therefore, officials were purposefully selected depending on their position and relevance for the crucial point of investigation and to collect accurate and relevant information based on their experience in their day-to-day performance of their responsibility in the study area. For instance, key informants from the Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs and the Women and Children Office of the study area were selected purposefully for an interview. Totally 170 Street children were included in this study based on their age and willingness to give the information.

**Source of Data**

For this study, both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Primary data was collected from the targeted source which helps to describe the contexts of the phenomenon. Because of this fact, the primary data was collected via interview schedule from street children, in-depth interviews, and FGD with some selected street children. Parallels, primary data were collected from a key informant from BoLSA and the Office of Women and children. In addition to primary data, a secondary source of data was used to substantiate the primary data across the study. These are journal articles, official documents, international conventions, conference papers, and annual reports by government and international organizations, and reports of NGOs.

**Data analysis techniques**

The data collected from the interview schedule was analyzed and presented descriptively through the statistical analysis which is limited to descriptive statistics, i.e. description of frequencies and percentages. Contrary to this the qualitative data which was collected through in-depth interviews, FGD, and key informant interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. This type of analysis is highly inductive, that is, the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researcher. Thus, the researcher reviewed all the transcripts of the interviews and write down a list of themes. After an interview, the collected data was transcribed, and each story was read several times to identify themes within each story. The themes that are common among all participant stories were selected for discussion and analysis.

**Result**

The finding of this research indicates the number male street children outweigh the female street children. Therefore, female street children are less visible on the street as compared to their counterpart. As far as their age is concerned, the vast majority of street children in the study areas are between the ages of 9-13. Regarding their distribution, the finding indicates large numbers of street children are found in Sod o town as compared to Jinka and Arbaminch. The finding further indicates lack of work opportunities and depression are the major impacts of the pandemic on street children followed by discrimination. Of the total interviewed street children 109(64.1%) of children stated that COVID-19 poses a big threat on access to work opportunities and feels depression whereas, 51(30%) respondents responded they face discrimination from different section of societies. Street children perform different activities for living. Among which carrying good in the market and around bus station and begging is the major one. But, due to restriction on human activities and
discrimination by the public, street children suffer a lot in accessing different means of livelihood. Therefore, street children lost all source of support due to containment measures taken by the government during COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, great majority of the people also perceived them negatively due to their living condition especially in the earlier stage of COVID-19. The finding of this study indicates out of the total sample, the vast majority of children 89(52.1%) replied there is discrimination or negative feeling from the public in the initial stage of the pandemic. But, gradually with the changing of public perception toward the pandemic, the feeling of the public toward street children is also changed.

For great majority of street children, street is their home for living. Thus, due to their life style they lack information about COVID-19. The finding of this study revealed that street children have an idea on the occurrence of the pandemic but, they lack adequate know how about the symptom, its transmission to others and how to protect themselves. Out of the total sample, 114 (67%) of children don’t know the symptom of the virus and how the virus is transmitted to others. At the same time, the majority of street children 90 (53%) do not see the virus as a serious threat to them because they don’t believe in existence of COVID-19. They developed this perception due to misinformation they heard from the public at large about the non-existence of the virus.

This study also attempted to uncovers the support of government office for street children during the outbreak of COVID-19. The finding of the study revealed that, local government attempted to shelter street children temporarily in the earlier stage of COVID-outbreak. In the shelter, the local government provided different types of items like t-shirts, soap, sheets, food, sanitizers, and mattress for the children for short period of time. But, beyond providing food and COVID-19 protection materials for brief period, the government doesn’t provide support for the children in a sustainable manner. The study further revealed, street children are not comfortable in the temporary shelter. They consider the temporary as a prison camp because children are not permitted to move freely in the in the temporary shelter. Hence, they feel like they lost their freedom. Therefore, large number street children tried to escape from the shelter especially from Jinka town.

Discussion

Table 1. Distribution of Street Children by Sex

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Own survey 2020/21

Looking at the sex of street children, most studies show a predominance of the male sex over the female. According to Shukla (2005), the proportion of girls among street children in developing countries is less than 30%. Less visibility of girls is associated with the factors, such as they are often socialized (taught by their families and culture) to be submissive and caring, and therefore, they tend to have fewer behavioral problems as compared to boys. Since girls have fewer behavioral problems, they have less conflict with their families and don’t leave their homes.

As to the case of the study areas, the vast majority of participants 168 (98.8%) are male and the remaining 2 (1.2%) are female. One possible explanation for this disproportion lies in traditional gender differences in child-rearing practices and cultural differences between males and female roles in our country, where girls are expected to engage in household duties more than boys. For boys, spending time outside the home with their peers is not necessarily perceived as negative. Another reason is that in cases of the death or absence of parents, girls are more likely to be taken care of by relatives than boys (Issa and Madelyn, 2017). Moreover, keeping girls at home is related to the strict gender division of labor at home. Domestic work is performed primarily by women. Therefore, girls are needed for their labor at home. At home, they help their mother with
domestic chores and look after younger siblings. In supporting the above argument key informant of the study areas reported that girls are less visible on the street as compared to boys in the study areas. They mention cultural factors and girls are more exposed to different difficulties including sexual violence and they are not visible on the street. Moreover, according to key informants of the three towns, most of the time girls prefer domestic work since they are not physically strong like boys to perform Labour outside home. Hence, they do not prefer the street as an alternative place for living.

Kevin Lalor (1999) also explains the reason why numbers of female street children are small in comparison to male street children as follows: The true incidence of working girls may be hidden by the nature of their work, which tends to be less visible than the work of street boys. For example, females may work as maids in bars, backstreet hotels, and private houses. Street boys, on the other hand, typically engaged in more visible activities such as car washing, shoe shining, and peddling.

**Age of Respondents**

The age of street children varies from place to place. In developing countries, children as young as eight live completely on their own whereas in developed countries, street children are over the age of twelve (Shukla, 2005). The following figure shows the age distribution of street children in the study areas.

The above figure 1 shows the distribution and percentage of the age of street children. It shows that most of the children 129 (76%) are between the age group of 9-13 and 41 (24%) children are between the age group of 14-17. As we observed from the figure large number of children joins street life at an early age. According to CSC (2009) cited in Mahderehiwot (2014) the average age at which children first become involved in street life in Ethiopia is 10.7 years.

**Birth Place of Respondents**

Data on figure 2 revealed that the majority of street children 124 (72.9%) are from Sodo and surrounding areas. The remaining 25 (14.7%) and 21 (12.4%) are from Arbaminch and surrounding as well as Jinka and surrounding respectively. But, an overwhelming majority of street children are from surrounding areas in all three towns. Of the total number, only 36 (21%) are from the towns and the rest of the 134 (79%) children come from the surrounding areas.

The results of key informant interviews also confirm this figure. According to the interview with officials, majority of street children are migrants from surrounding rural villages and small towns. They come to these towns either because of their family’s poverty or due to peer influence to look for a job in the town.
Unfortunately, life may not go as they thought, and at this time they are forced to live on the street. Key informants further emphasized that though the problem of street children is taken as an urban phenomenon, factors contributing to the problem are located elsewhere. Consequently, strategies to deal with this problem may need to be focused not only in the urban centers but also in rural communities, which constitute their parents’ original places.

Socio-Economic Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Street Children

Living as a street child is already a situation of misery, but greater sufferings come with the added hardships of COVID-19. Though different studies show that children are less likely to be infected by the virus, especially by the first variant of the COVID-19 pandemic but, they are among the biggest victims in terms of social and economic aspects. They lack adequate nutrition, access to water and sanitation, limited access to healthcare, and face discrimination and social exclusion due to their street connections, which are all ‘ordinary’ rights violations faced by children in street situations. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the vulnerabilities of children in street situations (CSCb, 2020).

Not alone street children but, all children of all ages, in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good (UN, 2020). The discussion in this section of the study illustrates the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic particularly on the street children.

As we can see from the figure 3 lack of work opportunities and depression are the major impacts of the pandemic on street children followed by discrimination. 109(64.1%) of children stated that due to COVID-19 they suffer from a lack of work opportunities and depression whereas, 51(30%) respondents responded to discrimination. The remaining 10(5.9%) respondents responded only lack of work opportunities. From this data, the vast majority almost 119(70%) face the problem of work opportunities during the outbreak of the pandemic. In support of this, interview results from BoLSA and women and children offices revealed that the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on street children is very high. Especially the lockdown measures of the government worsen their situation. Economic transactions and movement of people were limited during lockdown; this, in turn, limit their
chance to engage in different activities like carrying goods or items and begging which is their major source of income.

The results of FGD also revealed that at the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak most people would not let them carry their luggage during the market days because of their fear that they can be affected by the virus since street children don’t use COVID-19 protection measures. This highly impacts their access to work opportunities and income for their livelihood.

Other FGD discussants’ results also explain the case by supporting the above argument. They further explain that:

*We have no home to isolate ourselves like others; we have no money to buy food; since hotels have closed no chance to get leftovers which is our major source of food. Since some people are considering us as a threat, they don’t let us to carry their goods during the market and give us food when we beg. Though some volunteers tried to help us by providing food and clothes, it is not sustainable. Hence, the pandemic disrupts our livelihood more than any other section of society.*

Finding from the literature also indicates the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing containment measures have had a very serious impact on street children. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many street children lost sources of support to meet their daily subsistence needs (Tsinu et al., 2020, P. 6).

As it was observed from the data in figure 3, depression was another impact of the pandemic which distresses street children. The finding of the previous studies also revealed that stress and uncertainty associated with the COVID-19 outbreak has significant negative effects on children’s mental health. It increases in overall anxiety about the outbreak, confinement, and mitigation measures such as quarantine, school closures and uncertainty about high-stake final school exams, and social distancing, are impacting children’s daily lives. There is also a risk that the outbreak will have a greater effect on the mental health of children from low socio-economic backgrounds. The strong relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and mental ill-health is well documented, including during childhood (OECD, 2020; Elisabeth, 2020).

Discrimination or social exclusion was also another problem faced by the children during the outbreak of the pandemic. As mentioned by the children they face discrimination, especially in the initial period of the Covid-19 outbreak. This is also confirmed by FGD and key informant interviews. Existing literature also reveals that street children are increasingly being stigmatized and discriminated against by the general public, at a time when many people are afraid and misinformed (Pietkiewicz-Pareek, 2021).

In addition to the above-mentioned problem, assault by a drunken person is common, especially in their sleeping places. In strengthening this argument 15 years old boy from Jinka explained that:

*It is quite challenging to sleep on the street at the moment as we are facing beatings by drunken persons and robbery. He further explained that sometimes at night drunken people come to our sleeping place looking for money. If we fail to give them, they beat us for nothing. Unfortunately, we go nowhere to report our cases, even the police force didn’t want to cooperate or help us.*

Moreover, girls were specifically targeted and sexual violence was rampant during COVID-19 outbreak. In strengthening the above argument key informants of both offices stated that while they conduct registration of street children during the outbreak of COVID-19, they found street girls being raped and pregnant. As the researchers understood from in-depth interview result the social impacts of the pandemic was very high on girls. The cases of the following two girls are evident for this.

*A16 and 15 years old girls from Sodo reported that it is difficult to survive on the street without income and girls face more challenges than boys. People do not approach street children and it is difficult for us to get other jobs like housemaids, cooks, and babysitters because of the negative perception of the people about us and because of*
Therefore, COVID-19 is increasing the risk of children experiencing sexual abuse and harassment. Let alone street children, children with their families at home also become the victim of sexual harassment by their family members. As literature also revealed street children can find themselves vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence when they are living alone on the streets, especially under current circumstances. As it was discussed earlier discrimination by the public during the initial period of COVID-19 outbreak was common. Thus the following section deals with public perception of street children during COVID-19 outbreak.

The Interaction of Street Children with the Public during the Outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic

The ongoing discussion focuses on how the general public treats street children during the COVID-19 outbreak. The finding of the study indicates that the feeling of the public toward street children during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was negative.

Of the total sample, the vast majority of children 89(52.1%) replied there is discrimination or negative feeling from the public. 41(24.1%) replied the feeling of the public toward them was mixed and the remaining 40(23.5%) replied the public has positive feelings toward street children. The results of key informant interviews also revealed that the feeling of the society toward street children in the initial period of the COVID-19 outbreak was negative. Since such a kind of pandemic was new for the people and street children are more exposed to the virus due to their living conditions, most people don’t approach them.

Existing literature also reveals that street children are increasingly being stigmatized and discriminated by the general public, at a time when many people are afraid and misinformed (Pietkiewicz-Pareek, 2021).

But, gradually with the changing of public perception toward the pandemic, the feeling of the public toward street children also changed. This is also confirmed by the by key informants.
and the researcher's observation. Especially, after the lifting of lockdown measures, the situation is changed and there are kinds of mixed feelings of the public toward street children. Some sections of society are very compassionate and eager to help them. Even others view them negatively not because of a COVID-19 pandemic but due to their dirty look. In this regard, the finding of the study conducted by Mahederhiwot (2014) revealed that the public view of street living children in Ethiopia is overwhelmingly negative and street children are viewed with suspicion and fear.

**Street Children and their Awareness of COVID-19**

In the context of the COVID-19 emergency, children in street situations are at increased risk due to the lack of information or the inadequacy of the information made available to them on the existence of the virus, how to protect themselves, and what to do if they start to have symptoms. Where governments are sharing such information publicly, it may remain inaccessible to children in street situations due to lack of access to the necessary technology, inability to read, or a lack of understanding of the language used (CSC, 2020d). Street children in the study area were asked if they have heard about the COVID-19 pandemic, and the result revealed that they had all heard about the COVID-19 pandemic. They explained that they heard about the virus from the public and very few children mentioned both from the public and media. Though they have information about the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of street children lack adequate know-how about the symptom of the disease, how the virus is transmitted to others, and how to protect themselves. Of the total number, 114 (67%) of children don’t know the symptom and how the virus is transmitted to others.

At the same time, the majority of street children 90 (53%) do not see the virus serious threat because they don’t believe in existence of COVID-19. This perception is also confirmed by focus group discussion. FGD participants further emphasized that most street children have wrong perception about the virus, believing that they will not be infected and there is no coronavirus at all. Thus, they are unwilling to respect COVID-19 protocols, like wearing a mask, physical distancing, using sanitizer, and self-isolation. Street children developed this perception due to misinformation they heard from the public at large about the non-existence of the virus.

In this regard literature also revealed that a large amount of misinformation and disinformation about COVID-19 and how to prevent infection has been circulating. This has been responsible for the spread of myths and rumors about COVID-19 in the street and informal settlements. Hence, without access to accurate, up-to-date, and child-friendly information about the virus, how to keep themselves safe, and what new measures are being taken by authorities, street children are susceptible to rumors, ‘fake news, and gossip on the street (CSC, 2021).

However, 45 (26.5%) of street children know about symptoms and how to protect themselves but, due to a lack of personal protective equipment, they don’t use COVID-19 preventives measures. FGD discussant also reported they did not use COVID-19 preventatives because of economic problems. They further described that their lifestyle doesn’t allow them to respect COVID-19 preventive measures. For example, physical distancing was challenging for street children. In this connection, a 16-year-old boy from Arbaminch reported that it was difficult for street children to implement physical distancing while sharing the same night cloth among three or four peers sleeping together at night.

In this regard literature also revealed that many children in street situations are unable to carry out the basic precautions that everyone has been urged to take to protect themselves from the virus. When people are told to self-isolate, children in street situations may not have a safe home to go to. When told to wash their hands frequently, they have no soap or clean water to do it with. In addition, street children have no mobile phones, radios, and television. They are receiving information through word of mouth and hence, when instructions are given out over
the newspapers, radios, and television most street children cannot read and heard them and remain uninformed of even basic information (CSC, 2020d).

Of course, in the Ethiopian context, Ethio-telecom has been a vital contributor in providing information, by changing the normal call dial tone to COVID-19 related messaging, with themes including hand washing, social distancing, and distancing from those who are coughing and sneezing (Oxford Policy Management, 2020).

But, due to the inaccessibility of mobile phone street children don’t receive these messages. Though, they received this message and have sufficient information about how the virus is transmitted, of course their living condition doesn’t allow them to practice COVID-19 protection measures. Despite this fact, however, one cannot deny the fact that the role of information for street children to protect themselves from the virus.

On the other hand, very few street children (6.5%) attempted to respect COVID-19 protocol rarely like washing their hands with soap and wearing face masks. They used hotel and restaurant and water tanks stationed in front of buildings for COVID-19 containment to wash their hands. But when they were asked to explain from where they got the mask, they state either from garbage or roadside. A 15 years old boy from Jinka noted that:

> Sometimes “I used the re-used face mask by picking from the street to escape public discrimination and to approach people”.

This explanation stipulates that, street children wear a mask not with intention of protecting COVID-19, but rather to approach people either for begging, carrying goods, to get leftovers from hotels, and not to be arrested by police.

The Efforts of the Government Office and Support for Street Children during the COVID-19 Outbreak

During a pandemic, the ability to provide service without discrimination is an obvious requirement from the government for the survival of its citizens. In situations of protracted crisis, conflicts, and natural disasters governments must adopt targeted responses to protect and realize the right to food and nutrition of vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized groups including street children. According to UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999) states must always ensure that food is available, accessible, and affordable for everyone in enough quality and quantity to survive. The undergoing discussion illustrates the efforts made by the government office to help children in a street situation during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

When children were asked if they received support from the government office, 97 (57%) responded yes and 73 (43%) of respondents responded no. They explained that though not enough and sustainable, they received food, cloth, mask, soap, and sanitizers from the government office at the initial time of the COVID-19 outbreak. In this regard, key informant from the Arbaminch Bureau of Women and Children’s Office also reported that; together with other stakeholders street children were temporarily sheltered in kulfo campus of Arbaminch University and Bubu meda but, only for a short period during the outbreak of the pandemic.

Figure 5. Government office support for street children during COVID-19 outbreak

Source: Own survey 2020/21
The office attempted to provide different types of materials like t-shirts, soap, sheets, food, sanitizers, and mattress. They further emphasized that since the city administration has no sufficient income to support these children sustainably, by talking with concerned bodies they returned them to their respective Woredas, and those who were found in the town were also reunited with their families. But, the efforts of the office are not fruitful since most of the children back to the street after unification.

When we see the case of Sodo, like Arbaminch food, sanitizers, face mask, mattress, soap, and sheets were given to the children during their stay in the temporary shelters. Unlike Arbaminch, a key informant interviewee from Sodo BoLSA and Women and Children office reported that street children were sheltered almost for six months in Ligaba primary school. They further depicted that after six months of temporary shelter children who come from surrounding areas were returned to their respective areas whereas children from Sodo town around 29 get temporarily work in Sodo agricultural college as a Gardner and cleaning.

As we understood from the key informant interview of Sodo and Arba Minch, after sheltering children for a short period, they tried to reunite them with their families as a safeguarding measure against the COVID-19 pandemic. But, they realized that their effort was not fruitful since a large number of children are back on the street soon which is also a big challenge for local government to solve their problem consistently. Therefore, beyond providing food and COVID-19 protection materials, the city administration was not able to support street children permanently due to financial constraints. Thus, the local government, charity organizations, and other stakeholders should work a lot to address the problem from its root especially in the place of origin because the majority of children come from the surrounding areas.

Regarding defending the rights of street children the case of Sodo is relatively better. Though they are unable to bring the criminal to justice, the office at least takes care of those affected children. The researchers are also a witnesses to this because, while the researchers were making an interview with Sodo women and children, office representatives we heard a phone call from police officers to follow and support the case of 15 years old raped street girl.

The case of Jinka was also not different from Arbaminch and Sodo. According to information obtained from BoLSA and the women and children office of Jinka, 122 Street children are sheltered in a Hostel school only for two weeks during the outbreak of the pandemic, and food was provided for the children. But, since many children were not satisfied with the temporary shelter, children started to disappear from the shelter, and hence temporary shelter is closed after fifteen days.

After the closedown of the temporary shelter, no attempt was made to help street children in Jinka. According to the key informant, this is mainly because the office targeted the elders than street children during the outbreak of the pandemic believing that elders are more vulnerable to the virus than children. Moreover, street children were not a concern for the office since their number is quite small.

Key informants from Jinka and Arbaminch towns indicate that one of the key challenges in taking the children off the street was that children were not happy to be sheltered in temporary shelters. This is because their freedom of movement is restricted, and more importantly because of the fear that they will be returned to their birthplace and families. Hence, after they were sheltered, many children fled out of temporary shelter because they found it uncomfortable in comparison to life on the street considering life in the temporary shelter as worse than their previous situation. This explanation is also confirmed by the street children. But, the children claim inadequate food, lack of freedom, and depression as a reason for fleeing secretly from the temporary shelter. In supporting the above arguments a 15 years old boy from Jinka reported that:

In the shelter they give us only single bread with tea in the morning and no sufficient food was given for lunch and dinner. They don’t allow us even to
more freely in the shelter. They give us only a pencil and an exercise book to draw a picture. Since I found such a life uncomfortable, after one week I went out from there covertly.

As compared to Jinka and Arbaminch in Sodo, Street children stay in the temporary shelter for a long time, almost more than six months. A large number of street children 625 were sheltered. Despite large in number, there was no escape of children from the shelter like Jinka and Arbaminch. This is due to fact that the situation was handled with care and all concerned stakeholders provide available resources for the children with great attention.

In general from the key informant interview and interview with street children, one can learn that there was an attempt to shelter street children for a short period. But this novel idea didn’t last long because of two different reasons. One is from the government side and another is from the children's perspective. From the government's point of view lack of resources was the major challenge, whereas from the children’s perspective insufficient food supply and more importantly the shelter was like a prison for them as it deprives their freedom of movement though it is safe for their health.

Street Children, COVID-19, and Hunger

During the outbreak of the pandemic, finding daily meals is very challenging for street children. At the time of the pandemic, movements were restricted to minimize transmission of the disease thereby further hindering street children’s chance of securing daily meals. This puts them in dilemma of choosing between deaths either by hunger or COVID-19. Target groups of this study were asked which one of the two dangers was more serious to them. The data on figure 6 revealed that the vast majority of street children 154 (91%) worried about hunger than COVID-19. However, a very small percentage 16 (9%) responded they worried about COVID-19 than hunger.

FGD discussant also noted that they worried about hunger more than COVID-19 because they have the wrong perception about the virus or don’t believe in COVID-19 existence. They further emphasized since no street children contracted the virus among them, COVID-19 is not as such an issue for them. Few members of FGD again elaborate that “since we heard a rumor from the people that COVID-19 will not affect children we are more concerned about hunger”.

Existing literature also revealed that for many street-working children, hunger rather than COVID-19 is the most immediate threat. There has been an increase in street-connected children experiencing hunger and malnutrition, mainly due to the loss of income from informal and occasional work, but also due to the closure of schools, drop-in centers, and residential institutions which previously provided free meals (CSC, 2020c). Therefore, for many street children hunger was a pressing concern than covid-19. Since their usual activities are limited due to COVID-19 containment measures street children are left on empty stomachs and may be exposed to serious hunger and even starvation has become real among them.

Whereas very few children 16(9%) replied that they were worried more about COVID-19 than hunger. They also mentioned that since the public was in a panic about the pandemic in the initial stage and everyone is talking about it, as part of the society we are also worried about COVID-19 than hunger.

To sum up, street children are more concerned about hunger than COVID-19. Even those who are worried about COVID-19, is not because of
lethality of the virus but due to its socio-economic consequence it poses on them.

**Conclusion**

Based on the objectives of the study the following conclusions are drawn.

During the outbreak of the pandemic, the interaction of street children with the public was negative. This is mainly because, they were perceived by the majority of the people as a major transmitter of the pandemic due to their means of livelihood and their living conditions in general. Especially, during the early stage of the pandemic, when people were in a panic, social exclusion against street children was high. Even though discrimination against street children was high by the vast majority of the people still few individuals are willing to help them during the outbreak of the pandemic.

Even though street children get information about the COVID-19 pandemic from the public, the majority of the children don’t know the symptom and how it can be transmitted. They have also a wrong perception of the virus. They developed this perception due to misinformation they heard from the public at large about the non-existence of the COVID-19.

Because of their wrong perception and their living condition, the vast majority of street children less likely to worry about COVID-19 rather, they worried about food and how to relief their hunger.

The outbreaks of the pandemic negatively affect the socio-economic life of street children. It exacerbated the lives of street children from bad to worse. Among other things, COVID-19 highly deprives their work opportunity and led them to depression and discrimination from the public. Due to limited work opportunities, the pandemic significantly minimized their chance to earn money at least for daily meals.

During the outbreak of the pandemic, the government/ concerned offices tried to support the street children at least for a short period ranging from providing the necessary materials to reuniting them with their families. However, due to the unsustainability of support to the children they return to the street after their unification with their families and this is the greatest challenge for the government to address their problem permanently.

**Acknowledgement**

Many individuals and government institutions have contributed their part to the completion of this study. First of all we would like to thanks Arbaminch University for funding this study. We wish to acknowledge representatives of Arbaminch, Sodo and Jinka town women and children office and social and Labour affair office for their marvelous assistance to this research in providing valuable information. We were also indebted to all the children who provided us with all the necessary information during the fieldwork.

**Conflict of interests**

No conflict of interest.

**References**


