



Supporting street-based children through mobile service units in Egypt

Photo: Plan International / Heba Khalifa

This case study describes how mobile service units were effective in reaching, identifying and supporting children who were living and working on the streets in Egypt. It also describes the main challenges and successes of the pilot programme.

Background

Since 2011, the number of children living on the streets in urban areas has vastly increased in Egypt, as a result of political and economic changes in the country and wider region. The Syrian war has led to a growing number of Syrian refugee children who are living and working on the streets of Egypt's main urban centres. In 2017, the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) launched a five-year national initiative supported by the "Tahya Misr" Egyptian Presidential fund to support children living on the streets through outreach and comprehensive and community-level services. The project stood out for its distinctive focus on, and successful reach and holistic support to adolescent girls and young mothers.

Mobile service units for children living on the streets

The programme aimed to reach and support street-based children through mobile service units and community-level interventions, including interim care arrangements. The programme was implemented by the Ministry of Social Solidarity (MoSS) in collaboration with partner NGOs Hope Village Society, Family for Every Child and Caritas, all organisations with extensive experience in working with street and working children in Egypt.

The programme has the following components:

- Identification of children living and/or working on the streets, and a mapping of "hot-spot" areas where many street-based children were concentrated, through research conducted by the National Centre for Social and Criminological Research in Egypt and supported by MoSS.

- Establishment of NGO-run “mobile service delivery units” with specialised staff who are equipped to:
 - conduct outreach to identify girls and boys living and/or working on the streets in the identified child labour hot spots;
 - register children and conduct an initial health assessment, while they are provided with snacks and meals and have access to recreational activities and games, including computer games, in the presence of a trained social worker and psychologist;
 - conduct child-friendly case planning with the aim to work with the child until they are fully rehabilitated and re-integrated within their family;
 - where necessary, refer the child to a MoSS-run interim case centre for shelter and care of unaccompanied children, including those specific for girls or boys.
- Refurbishment and equipping of pre-existing MoSS interim care centres/shelters to meet the needs of street-based children and adolescents, including those with an impairment. For example, ground floor rooms were created with accessible bathrooms for children with mobility impairments.
- Specific interim care shelters were established for adolescent girls to accommodate their specific needs. The centre for street-based girls who were survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) was opened in Cairo to ensure appropriate and holistic support, and rehabilitation for the adolescent girls and their children. These services were provided by Hope Village Society in collaboration with MoSS.
- Referral of children to formal education, including primary and secondary schools. Where children had education gaps, they were enrolled in alternative or accelerated learning programmes including literacy and numeracy classes, vocational training or apprenticeship programmes.
- Family reunification for separated children and unaccompanied minors and reintegration within their communities.

Challenges

- A main challenge was to locate children and adolescents who were living and/or working on the streets.
- Once identified, some children and adolescents were not immediately willing to enter the rehabilitation programmes as they were used to living and working independently.
- Many children and adolescents were used to earning money rapidly through begging or selling on the streets and were reluctant to give this up.
- Some children and adolescents were controlled by gangs and mafia groups, which posed challenges when attempting to detach them from these groups and the streets, with the risk that they would go back to the streets or participate in illicit activities.
- Other challenges included the sustainability of the rather costly interventions, including the need for further specialised training for NGO workers.

Successes

- The pilot programme, initially resourced through the Presidential Fund “Tahya Misr” and the participating NGOs, was successful and this model had been integrated into the overall national governmental and Presidential Initiative budget for scale-up. Today, the prevalence of children now living and/or working on the streets of Egypt, especially in Cairo, is lower than prior to the project.
- The programme was successful in reaching adolescent girls and child survivors of SGBV and in providing holistic services to support their resilience and rehabilitation.
- One of the strengths of this programme was the multi-level approach with different levels of political cooperation and complementarity between service providers, including partnerships at the grassroots community level.

- The mobile service units have been a successful modality to conduct outreach and build trust with children on the streets through initial service provision. This approach was also effective for identifying children who required more specialised support and/or alternative care arrangements.
- It is believed that the mobile units can reach a higher number of children and at a lower cost, compared to fixed centres. Moreover, street-based children are more likely to attend mobile units than to remain at residential care centres for long.