The Reintegration of Street boys and girl mothers in Sierra Leone by HANCi/SL

Mr. Chairman, Representatives of various governments, Delegates, distinguished ladies and gentle men. I feel very honoured to be granted this privileged as one of the winners of the call for participation to make a presentation on our work with regards to the reintegration of street boys and girl mothers into their communities and making them becoming useful contributors in the nation building of our war torn country Sierra Leone through the help of ICT.

My organisation, Help a Needy Child in Sierra Lone – HANCi/SL is a local organisation entirely run by Sierra Leoneans with funds generated from within and also from our overseas partners to restore the lost dignity in the lives of vulnerable children. This organisation was born out of a felt need to provide shelter to unaccompanied children from war ravaged regions within Sierra Leone in 1994. During this time our focus was to provide shelter where these children will experience love, care and protection in the thick of bombs and bullets.

In 2000 when the war was declared over, we started reintegrating these children back into their communities reunifying them with any surviving relative. It was during this phase of our project that we were faced with the resounding realities of street boys and suckling teenage mothers who were forcefully abducted and held as sex salves or child combatants during the war by the fighting forces. These children could not go back home because the society viewed them as being rebel collaborators and thereby becoming victims of a situation that was not of their making. They therefore ended up as street kids becoming an embarrassment to the nation in their bid to survive in a hostile environment.

Post-conflict Sierra Leone has over 300,000 street children and teenage girl mothers who dropped out of school during and after the war. Many organizations tried to reintegrate them back into their communities and to send them back to school. They however, failed in many cases because most of these children were already over age for their classes and most of those who were sent to learn the traditional Sierra Leone skills offered in technical and vocational institutes such as gara-tie and dyeing, tailoring, weaving etc were no longer interested in such trade. Through a marketing survey undertaking by our organisation we discovered an untapped market for youths in Sierra Leone. Therefore in
2005/06 we introduced ICT into their training as an option to the already saturated market with traditional skills. It was remarkable to discover that many of these children who were first described as drop outs were very much interested in this field.

During our annual project review last year in which our beneficiaries and key community stakeholders actively participated, one major recommendation by the beneficiaries was the inclusion of and access to ICT into their training in areas such as

- Basic computer hardware maintenance,
- Software installation
- Networking configuration and
- That they should be given access to ICT in order to form support networks amongst themselves across the country.

However, the saddest bit of it all was there are very few institutions offering courses in ICT and those available are not well equipped to produce any kid who can compete in this untapped market in Sierra Leone. Moreover, most of these institutions are not prepared to admit vulnerable groups such as street children and suckling girl mothers because they view them as problematic and bad influence to other children in their institutions. It is on this background that HANCi is crying and soliciting for funds to enable us

1. equip our Technical and Vocational Training Centre for street children and girl mothers at Kissy in Freetown, Sierra Leone
2. To secure and equip a mobile ICT training unit for these children because we believe in them and that with the right tools in hand they can also contribute in building Sierra Leone.

Our aim is to empower street children and girl mothers access their economic and human rights and successfully reintegrate them back into their communities through ICT.

At the moment we are working with 500 street boys and teenage mothers across Sierra Leone by empowering them to take control of their destinies.

**Our Strategy:** In Sierra Leone the problem with street children and girl mothers is clearly evident in the bigger cities, therefore, our work with street children and girl mothers is found in three areas, Freetown the capital city, Bo in the south and Makeni in the north of
Sierra Leone. These areas were selected bases that most of the children we originally reintegrated are found within these regions and so our presence in these areas will serve as a support base for them. It is our conviction that if vulnerable children in these three cities are trained in ICT it will positively impact on the perception of people about ICT as a worthwhile venture for youths and its rippling effect will trickle down to the educational system and the economy of Sierra Leone.

In Freetown, our current vocational center will be equipped with the necessary equipment for ICT training. This will be a center where street kids interested in ICT will be trained in basic ICT skills as a means to an end. Our intention after their successful completion of training is to group them into small cottage industries and assist them with start up kits so that they can apply their skills and earn their livelihoods by opening maintenance and repair centre for ICT equipment. The project will also help the beneficiaries to open an internet café and photocopying centre which the public will utilise by paying client fees. We will encourage our beneficiaries to utilise part of the resources from these activities for their welfare while they plough back the rest of the income generated into their individual project.

Moreover, the project will encourage street children to form kids’ clubs through which they could share their experiences in coping with challenges in their homes, schools and communities. They will use ICT to stay in touch with each other and through the use of ICT they will be able to promptly report cases of abuse to the authorities.

It is however; clear that this model will only address the children who would come to the center whilst the greater majority of vulnerable go without. As a result of this the organisation will also undertake a mobile ICT unit that will be moving within Bo and Makeni to train street kids in basic ICT as a means of livelihood. It is worth noting that all of these will bring a forgotten generation in close contact with privileged kids and by so doing bridges the gap between these created classes of children.

HANCi/SL has been working with these categories of children for over seven years and has gathered a wealth of experience to the extend that our work with Street boys has been described as a model of best practice by the regional office of the ministry of Social Welfare, gender and Children’s Affair. In Makeni also our work with teenage girl
mothers have also been described as a model of best practice. In all of the communities we work in, we have been able to established community structures that support the reintegration of vulnerable children in these communities. As of 2007, we have been able to reintegrate 300 street boys and 400 teenage girl mothers with their families and communities. Most of these children have either benefited form educational support or vocational training as a form a reintegration package.

Through the use of a support plan for beneficiaries we have been able to clearly identify the needs of a beneficiary from which an intervention plan is developed and implemented. The use of support plans has enabled us to properly manage resources and to focus our interventions on the bases of expected outcomes. Therefore funds entrusted to us always meet their intended target.

**Distribution of beneficiaries:** The table below indicates the distribution of the intended beneficiaries;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>The Kissy Vocational Center</th>
<th>ICT Mobile Unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>St. Boys</td>
<td>Girls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**In Conclusion:** Even though ICT is a new phenomenon in Sierra Leone, our experience with it in our work with street children and girl mothers has informed us that it have great potentials to contribute immensely towards the development of our country Sierra Leone. Moreover, the interest shown by the beneficiaries for ICT is a clear indication that ICT has a future in our country. The untapped resources in our youths can be better exploited through Information and Communication Technology.

Why should we allow such children become a double victim of a situation that is not of their own making, first they were rejected by their own communities and now by learning institutions for a situation they never opted for. Why can’t we as responsible people,
governments, and policy makers give these children an opportunity to learn through
elearning and make their mark in nation building? We owe it them they need our support
because they believe in us. Remember we have all got just one opportunity to pass
through this world and therefore why not take hold of this opportunity to save a life of an
innocent child who is crying out to you for help. They need elearning to bridge the gap, it
is affordable and is user friendly. They want to use this forum to tell their stories so that
others can learn, let’s give them this opportunity.

On behalf of these children, I want to thank you all for you kind attention, may we
always find a place in our heart to improve the plight of vulnerable children through
elearning.

Faithfully submitted
Emmanuel Kelfa Kargbo
Operations Director
Help a Needy Child in Sierra Leone – HANCi/SL