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Urban child poverty in Kampala city, insights from children's drawings

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Abstract

In many urban areas, rapid urbanization, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, has overwhelmed technical and administrative capacity to provide adequate services. This has led to various challenges of urban sustainability, including urban child poverty, known to worsen the cognitive and emotional well-being of such children. We aimed to gain an understanding of and provide evidence on urban child poverty in Uganda through children's diagrammatic representations of the drivers, effects, and needed interventions. We used children's drawings, in-depth interpretations of these drawings, and observations. Using a two-stage sampling strategy, data were collected from four poor slum zones within Kampala city. Through purposive sampling, 26 deprived slum dwelling children aged between 7 and 15 years, who were willing to take part in the study, were asked to share their stories regarding their experiences of urban poverty using drawings, and generating narratives about them. Data analysis was done using a participatory design of the code-book, drawing visualization, and analysis. Some verbatim statements were also picked directly from raw data and used to strengthen this analysis and reporting. Children were well conversant with the problem of urban child poverty based on its causes, manifestations, and effects. Children expressed that urban child poverty was linked to domestic violence, lack of parental care, chronic sickness, orphanhood, and the absence of child support services in the community. Effects of urban poverty included the inability to use medical facilities, lack of access to information, ill health, coping with street life through violence, poor shelter, overcrowding, lack of social capital, and being excluded from basic decision-making processes at all levels. There is also a need to build on the available child rights initiatives in urban areas and elsewhere as a means to reduce these urban distortions. Continuous investment in research to present the different experiences of urban vulnerable groups should also be done to underpin evidence-based urban programming.

Keywords Child(ren), Urban, Drawings, Deprivation, Poverty, Drivers, Kampala city



1 Background

The Global South's rapid urbanization has overwhelmed technical and administrative capacity to provide adequate services in many urban areas, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). In Asia and Africa, the UN-Habitat estimates that currently, over 500 million children live in slum households¹. In part, this has led to various challenges of urban sustainability, including urban child poverty [1]. The unplanned and unregulated urbanization has exerted stress on infrastructure, public services, and urban finances, leading to service delivery and development challenges since little value is added by the urbanizing population [2–4].

Due to these challenges, some studies have indicated that there is increased urban child poverty, with the attendant vulnerabilities [5–8]. Other studies indicate that more than half of the world's children are below the international poverty line and are deprived and violated. Poverty among children negatively impacts and worsens their cognitive and emotional well-being [5, 9]. This situation is dire in sub-Saharan Africa, a region that, despite being one of the least urbanized in the world, already has a rapidly increasing number of children in urban poverty. Since Uganda's multi-dimensional poverty stands at 27%², the implication is that many urban poor children in the country are deprived of the basic rights and services since they remain unserved in overcrowded urban settlements [10]. Thus, urban poor children suffer exclusion from essential services. They are victims of crime and exploitation, and many times perpetrators of crime as a means of survival³.

Cahill [11] opines that the engagement of young people and children in research addresses issues of social exclusion while democratizing the research agenda. In addition, child participation tends to build the capacity of young people to analyze and transform their own lives while the community better appreciates the real issues affecting children [11]. Conducting child-centered research emphasizes child agency by allowing children to voice their opinions on issues that affect them [12]. While the use of artistic drawings has a long history in community development research with children, drawings have often been used as projective tests rather than as tools to access the views of children living in poverty [13]. Therefore, engaging and hearing from children firsthand advances their perspective to inform policy and interventions better. Through the use of child drawings, adult researchers can explore children's experiences, interact with their perspectives, make meaning of children's experiences, and generally depart from adult-centric methods of understanding children's lives in social contexts [14]. We hope this approach will promote the children's aspirations as well as promote the empowerment, autonomy, agency, and participation of children in our research as a democratic process. Drawings by children are known to be a medium that allows young children to express themselves as well as an effective way for them to share their environment with researchers [11, 15].

Through children's drawings, therefore, this paper aims to offer an exposition of children's insights on the drivers, effects, and needed interventions on urban child poverty in Uganda and beyond. It further aims at gaining an understanding and documenting children's perspectives on urban child poverty in Uganda. Consequently, we argue in this

¹ Urban indicators database, UN Habitat 2021.

² <https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/Child-Poverty-in-Uganda.pdf>.

³ <https://www.unicef.org/media/89226/file/The%20State%20of%20the%20World's%20Children%202012.pdf>.

paper that this exploration supports efforts for meaningful understanding of children's challenges as they navigate everyday life in the context of urban poverty. This deeper understanding is urgently needed and key in Uganda, where more children living in Kampala live in poverty than elsewhere in the country [1, 16–18].

2 Methodology

2.1 Study design

We used Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological approach to the study of urban child poverty in Kampala. This approach situates child poverty within the context of several interacting social systems and domains [19]. Scholars have called for children to have more control over the research process through the 'destabilization' of generational conventions and hierarchies on matters that shape their futures [20–23]. Child poverty and deprivation are hard to capture with quantitatively driven measures, and therefore require explicit and separate attention that is participatory and empowering [24]. As such, the study worked with individual children to illustrate their understanding of poverty through drawings. The rationale for the use of drawings is that they are a child-centered methodology that appreciates and promotes the consideration of children as custodians of their lived experiences [25]. The use of drawings provides an opportunity for children to voice, share, articulate, expose, and express their views themselves. Drawings provide rich information concerning children's understanding and lived experiences, social circumstances, values, and aspirations that are not limited by linguistic proficiency or cultural contexts [25–27]. This study draws on a participatory-phenomenological design that used children's drawings, in-depth interpretations of these drawings, and observations. This design aimed at engaging children as co-researchers, enabling them to express their experiences in an unstructured manner and to draw meaning from their drawings [28]. By talking about their drawings, the children generated narratives on the drivers, effects, and needed interventions to tackle the urban child poverty trajectory in Kampala.

2.2 Study population and sample

The study used purposeful sampling to guide participant selection and recruitment [29]. We used an NGO focused on poor children in Kampala city as our primary contact and entry point into the field, which introduced us to both political leaders and the children. Using referrals, the children that we interviewed directed us to reach out to more urban poor children who were willing to be interviewed through the drawing method. All children in the study setting identified as poor by the NGO staff or referred to the study team by children who had participated in the study were recruited consecutively until when 26 children had been recruited and the issues became repetitive. The participants were empowered minors aged between 7 and 15 years. The working with minors in research involves the shift of power dynamics where children are seen as active contributors thereby allowing them to share their lived experiences and influence research. Our approach promotes ethical engagement by respecting children's autonomy through their perspectives and input [30, 31].

We met the children in open space areas in the very communities where they lived and worked, in their familiar surroundings, and in these spaces that they perceived as safe.

This was to enable the children to be free and therefore more engaged when approached to participate in the study.

2.3 Data collection

We collected data from four (4) poor slum zones (White Nile, Gogonya, Kisenyi, and Biina -A) within Kampala city. These parishes are known for poor socioeconomic indices, including a lack of access to safe and clean water, a lack of access to healthcare, large household sizes, and high dependency rates with associated negative effects such as unemployment [1, 32]. We interviewed 26 children who were asked to share their stories regarding their experiences of urban poverty using drawings and generating narratives about them. Using a two-stage purposive sampling process, we selected four poor zones from the slums of Kampala. The final selection was done after listing poor zones and then identifying children who were deprived yet willing to take part in the study. Data was collected from the month of May until September 2019. We included socially deprived children who lacked shelter, did not have enough food, were out of school, the orphaned, or were in child labour. The data collection team consisted of four research assistants, two male and two female university graduates with extensive experience in conducting qualitative data collection and interviews including with children and adolescents. The data collection phase was supervised by the first and last authors who have extensive experience in qualitative research involving vulnerable groups such as children, adolescents, and women from low-income groups.

2.4 Data management and analysis

The children were asked to explain and talk about their finished drawings. There was a participatory design of the code-book, drawing visualization, and analysis. Two investigators individually reviewed the drawings and statements of children and generated themes and sub-themes. These were presented at a study team meeting for harmonization into a code book. We conducted the first coding cycle, the second coding cycle, and an inter-coder reliability (ICR) session. The first author led this process. We ranked the individual narratives and drawings based on their relevance to urban child poverty, causes, drivers, and needed interventions. This served the initial internal validity and quality assurance at the level of data analysis. Some verbatim statements were used to strengthen this analysis. We focused on the interpretation of the children's drawings and the statements they made about their drawings. We treated the drawings as 'data' that was interpreted, but also triangulated these drawings with the comments from children varying by age and gender. The analysis of drawings and the discussions of these drawings revealed a nuanced depiction of concepts, emotions, and information in ways that were more expressive, relevant and empowering. We validated the findings with the communities and children to gain validity and consistency of the meanings.

2.5 Ethics declaration

We used participatory community ethics. This ethical approach was an exercise in ethical reflexivity [33]. The ethical process started with study clearance from child-focused NGOs serving the respective community and area leaders (both technical and political) who looked into the ethical suitability of the study. Community leaders provided information to potential children and their guardians and linked them to the study team for

more details and consenting. This process was ongoing, sometimes involving children and their caregivers going back to their leaders for clarification before reaching the final decision to participate in the study. In this regard, this flexible approach provided study participants and their guardians an opportunity to informed consent.

Community-based participatory research approach (CBPR) focuses on the equitable involvement of community members or local actors in all phases of the research process [34–36]. We obtained verbal informed consent from guardians of children before any interview was carried out. In addition, verbal assent was obtained from all children before conducting interviews. This was witnessed by either a guardian or a parent before data collection. We chose the community ethics path to negotiate consent in the context of the study, given the complex, peripheral, and marginal nature of urban poor children. The variability of consent demanded a reflexive approach where a formulaic devotion to the procedure would be inadequate, counterproductive, and against the principle of participatory research [37]. A research process that is not reflexive in the securing of consent shies away from the active engagement of research ethics. To ensure confidentiality, participant details and names were not taken, therefore, it is not possible to identify study participants from the contents of this paper. Interviews took place in private but secure locations that the children approved. The drawing sessions lasted no more than 25 min. This is a reasonable time for the ages of the children who participated in the study. The privacy of children is protected through anonymous reporting of the study findings. During the study, we had referral protocols for those who needed support services, such as counselling support to protect them from further harm. This approach facilitated participant well-being. We believe that this paper has enabled a critical reflection on research assumptions, values, beliefs and practices in child focused research. We believe that our study approach was ethically stringent and informed decisions aimed at positively impacting the lives of urban poor children; both directly and indirectly. The study had no intervention so could not cause any harm to participating children as it was neither a trial nor an experiment.

2.6 Findings

The main themes from the results included engaging in child labour and other dangerous activities, begging, not having basic needs in life, being harassed and exposed to violence, lacking adequate healthcare, and being deprived of love and belonging. The analysis of the drawings converged on what the children thought were the causes of urban child poverty, how they dealt with urban child poverty in their everyday living, and what they perceived as the impacts of urban child poverty in their lives. These findings show that if the issues of urban child poverty are to be addressed, these and more conditions should be key areas of concern at community and pragmatic levels of action. This we argue requires the revisiting of the socio-ecologies of children.

2.7 Children's construction of poverty and its drivers

We found that children were well conversant with the problem of urban child poverty based on its causes, manifestations, and effects. The children indicated that urban child poverty occurs at community, household, and individual levels. They also indicated that their experiences across these levels precipitate poverty. One child noted that:

'In this city when you have poor parents, lack parents or are abandoned by parents, without any guardian, you are likely to lack food, clothes, water, housing, miss education, health care, love and are always harassed... and suffer like we are suffering...'

Other participating children said *'...even when we work hard, the obstacles are very many...'* Another child added *'it is very easy to give up because every day seems like a fresh start...'* while another child said that; *'We do not have much to begin with...'*

The narratives of children revealed a clear understanding of child urban poverty and its drivers. Children's conceptualize of reality, was more advanced than their average age and reasoning capacity. This could be attributed to the demands and distress exacted on children, causing them to mature faster than the children who have care and guardianship. Such events were not appropriate to be experienced at such an early age in one's life.

Children conceptualized urban child poverty in terms of: feeding from dustbins, wearing rags, begging, having unkempt hair, not taking a bath, chronic sickness, especially HIV, orphanhood, the absence of child support services, and being out of school. From our observations during the interactions of these children, many had scars and wounds on their bodies. It may not be possible to adequately estimate the damage done to these children, both in the medium and long run. Figure 1 illustrates a child in tattered clothes and carrying an overbearing load.

[From Fig. 1: *"story about a poor child: a poor child is a child who lost both parents and does not have some (one) to offer help. Here, he moves to streets to join other children on the streets where he is fast (first) teased because he's new to the place"*].

Deprivation was further seen by children on the basis of family size. A large family size experienced huge pressure to meet the demands of the many children. This usually translated into meagre family resources to meet family needs which pushed children away from homes to find alternative ways of survival.

'We are many children at home. We cannot have enough. We are always in need. I wish we were fewer!'

As a result, many children drop out of school, and could not afford healthy nutrition, a critical element in their growth and development which if not addressed compromises their immunity and puts them at risk of disease and infection which most times go untreated.

'For us who are not educated we cannot get jobs in offices because they tell us that we do not know computer so they can't give you a job. So, we be here in town we work on trucks that bring food from the villages to offload...'

The loss of parents did not only precipitate material poverty, but also emotional poverty in the form of loss and missed parental love, trauma, anxiety, and a lack of direction in terms of life choices. Children noted that they did not have anyone to offer emotional support to them.

Children narrated their childhood poverty experience and many linked it to the loss of parents and the state of orphanhood. This meant that they saw parents as a great asset in child upbringing. Losing one or both parents as an adverse life event left children without care and in deep thoughts that were traumatizing and depressing. In Fig. 2, the child

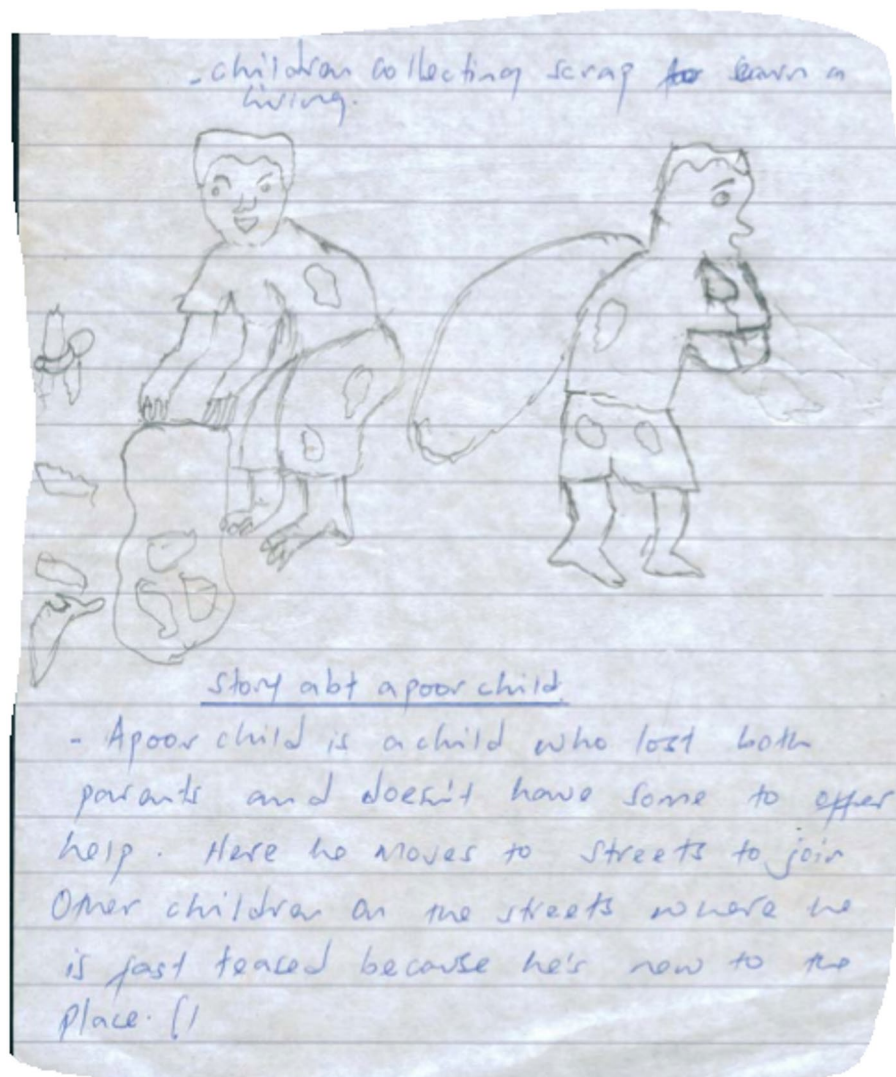


Fig. 1 Street life as a means of coping with child poverty

is disconsolate and not sure how to meet the challenges of life. The child explained that their parents had died of HIV.

'Both my parents died of AIDS. I think life would be better if at least one of them was alive.'

This finding points to the full knowledge that children had about chronic and terminal diseases as drivers of child poverty and misery. While orphans were faced with a lack of parenthood, poor children who had terminally ill or incapacitated parents seemed to have more demand at their hands than the by the orphaned children compounded struggles to meet costs for their upkeep, the medical care expenses of their sick parents, and the physical and emotional strain of offering care to sick parents. Findings show that child-headed households encountered unique forms of vulnerability that require close analysis.

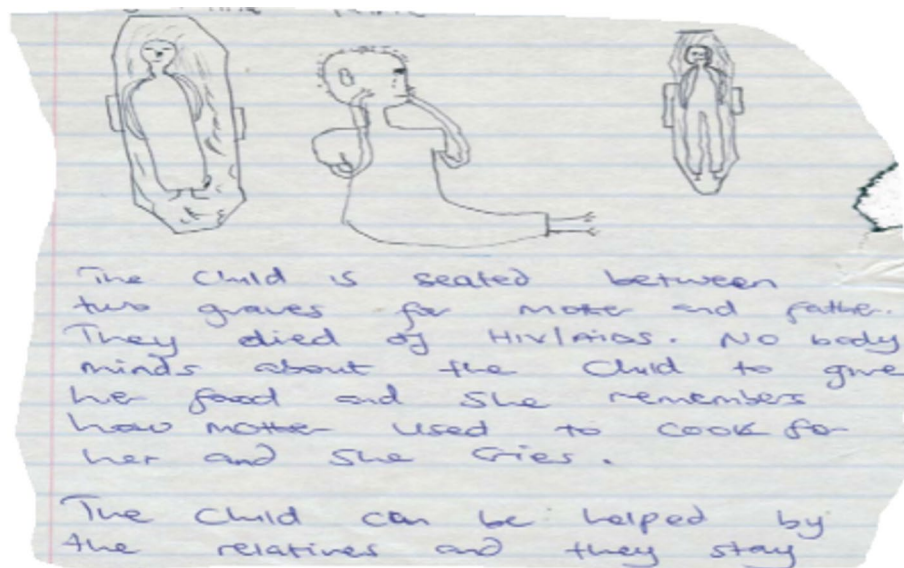


Fig. 2 Orphan hood as a cause and driver of child urban poverty

2.8 Domestic violence as a cause of urban child poverty

Children mentioned domestic violence as another common cause of urban child poverty in the study setting. Children illustrated that them being beaten and abandoned, including separation and divorce, were some of the push factors that drove some children to live on streets.

Other children's drawings revealed that they run away from their homes due to targeted child-related violence within their households. In Fig. 3, the child reflects on how they had experienced physical violence through beatings from their stepmother. They also narrated that they were sent away from home with a warning never to return. Other children revealed that being away from their homes relieved them from having to experience targeted violence from mainly stepparents which ranged from being beaten, sexual abuse, being denied food, and or being locked outside of their own homes at night. While it is arguable that children's relocation to the streets offers them some temporal freedom from the violence in their homes, life on the street had continued to expose children to extremely tough conditions.

We also found that some poor children in Kampala had migrated from rural areas due to the poor living conditions that did not offer any hope. One child narrated that.

'Life is not yet good on the street. But in the village, there was no hope. At least here you see rich people and also get some hope that one day you may be rich somehow. Seeing some rich people makes you get hope for your future.'

The poor rural conditions and poverty in these areas lead to low prospects for a successful future and lead to rural urban migration where families/parents and unaccompanied children from rural areas form part of the urban poor. The majority of these migrant children end up on the streets after escaping poverty to become poor and trapped in the urban maze.

Across the narratives of most children, children with stepparents, street children, abandoned, and or neglected children, children of poor parents, children of divorced

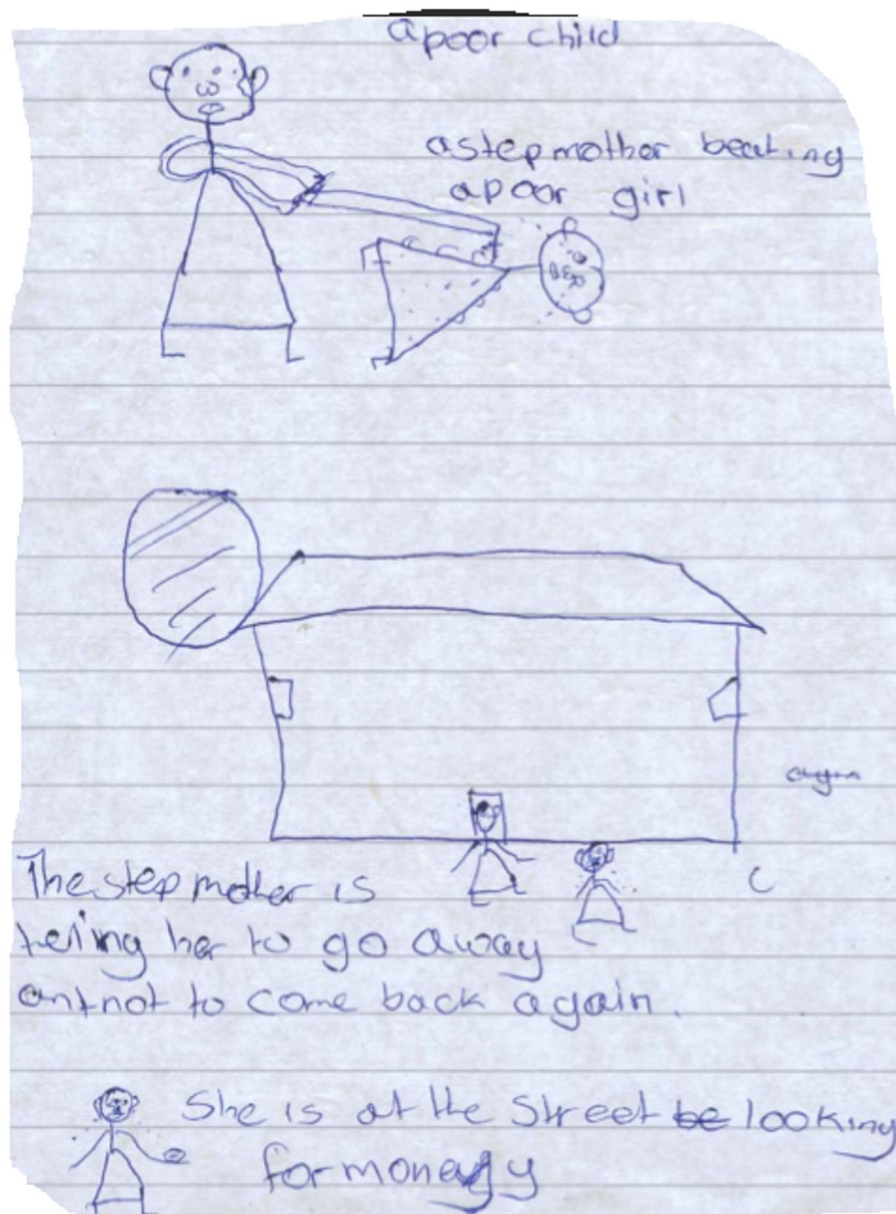


Fig. 3 A step mother beating a girl, telling her to go away and ends up on the street

and or separated parents, children out of school, refugee children, and children with disabilities were more described as being more prone to urban child poverty.

2.9 Effects of poverty on children

Children were asked to narrate the effects of child poverty on their lives and well-being. Children stated several effects of urban poverty on their childhoods. Various forms of deprivations were common in children's narratives. Children dreaded the lack of proper shelter, especially poor beddings and poor sanitation that exposed them to sanitation-related ailments. The rampant mosquito bites that exposed them to malaria infections was a point of concern. Some children illustrated overcrowding, the lack of acceptance from the wealthier and being segregated against by the public, spending nights in makeshift shelters with improvised beddings as manifestations of poverty. Children narrated

that when ill, they resorted to self-medication, sometimes with unknown substances. Such practices put these children's lives further at risk including possible loss of lives. Figure 4 illustrate this argument.

In the course of searching for how to survive, children were exposed to the risks of urban poor waste management and disposal while scavenging from waste dumps for food. While. Some children narrated undertaking hazardous tasks such as emptying latrines and disposing of harmful substances, which they did not actually comprehend, usually at low cost and without any protection. We found that children were handy in these dead-end activities because they were cheap to hire. This at times resulted in injuries, let alone the unknown effects on their lives both in the short and long run.

2.10 Discrimination and stigmatization

Children reported experiencing stigma from fellow children and adults who labelled and stereotyped them. This was linked to the presentation of the self [38]. Stigma was linked to being distracted by things they lacked, yet other children had them, especially toys or shoes. Children noted that they were harshly treated by various people, including service providers and professionals, local authorities, and healthcare providers. The social stigma led to poor health-seeking behaviour for services that were critical such as sexual reproductive and health rights including HIV care and treatment, even when these services were free of charge.

'We are called thugs, thieves, problems and seen as unwanted since we largely just survive. No one thinks we are useful. Even at the health facility, they look at us as responsible for all our problems. When you have a skin condition you are blamed for having been caught stealing. Everything is associated to being in the wrong. We cannot be seen as innocent like other children. In the process we live in fear and anxiety.'

Discrimination against poor children was emphasized by one child participant who indicated that:

When I go to play with my friends, their parents would send me away that I was going to steal their toys and food. This is why we sometimes go out of home and try playing on the street hoping that no one will abuse us...!

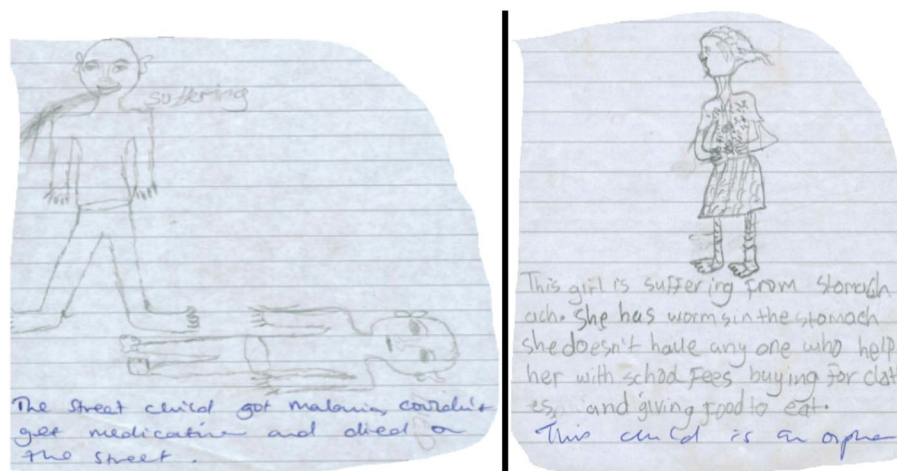


Fig. 4 Street life and coping with illness

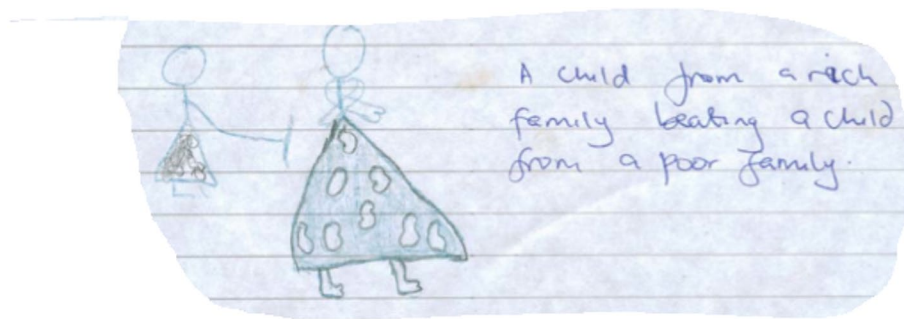


Fig. 5 A rich/better off child beating a street/poor child

Another child's drawing in Fig. 5 narrates that one child from a rich family is even extreme by not only discriminating a poor child but she goes ahead to beat her up. Urban child poverty is one of the most distressing experiences to endure.

Such conditions undermine the growth and development of these children who in the end grow up with low self-esteem and affects their capacity to make decisions.

2.11 Exploitation and sexual abuse

Although not expressed through drawings. Through narratives, we found indications of poor children having been exposed to exploitation, sexual abuse, and had both witnessed or made to prostitute themselves. Some children in the reported adverse events pointed having been enticed with simple items and life provisions. This was most common among illiterate, migrant, and refugee children. Those children with acute financial needs and heavy care burdens were more exposed to and targeted. The conceptual worlds of these children could not well imagine many dangers, if they did, they had few choices.

'One of our friends told us that she would be going abroad to work and earn dollars and become rich. She was so eager to find the money to top up on the requirements. She started being less frequent and not willing to give much detail. She told us that she would be leaving soon and would let us know when she reaches abroad. That is the last time we heard from her. We think she got in trouble. No one has heard from her.'

'Sometimes strangers ask if you are courageous and without any fear. If you say yes, they tell you that you can join them to make money only if you are willing to be secretive and not disclose their operations. We have since known that some of these people are thieves that want us to help them....'

'I have been approached by people (men and women) that offer to give me work, but I have since realized that the work involves having sex with a group of men. I ran away and now I'm here struggling on the street.'

Some children narrated having escaped poor working conditions that were associated with sexual exploitation and abuse, defilement, and non-payment. Such treatment came along with other challenges; such as risks of being infected with HIV.

3 Discussion

3.1 The extent, drivers and effects of child urban poverty

Our findings revealed that child urban poverty and deprivation was a common reality for many children in Kampala driven by child abuse and neglect, divorce or separation of parents, and displacement. De Milliano and Plavgo [39] indicate that over 67% of children in sub-Saharan Africa are in conditions of deprivation. Urban child poverty remains a very big social problem that needs immediate attention from all stakeholders [40]. Findings of our study show that urban child poverty is a multidimensional problem that needs specific attention and a focus on tackling its root causes and drivers. There is evidence that urban child poverty affects the growth and development of children [41–43]. Urban areas present some very specific challenges for those in poverty, having significant and often disproportionate impacts on children and adolescents, undermining their rights, and well-being in ways that require particular responses. Deprivation of children results in school dropout which limits entry in gainful employment that further sustains the poverty cycle and its transmission to future generations.

Our findings also indicate that all the children who participated in the study were graphically and acutely aware of urban child poverty. They instinctively illustrated and narrated its indicators and dimensions including, ill health, hunger, being out of school, child marriages, stress, anger, bitterness, depression, and helplessness. Children who had especially at one-time experienced proper care and enjoyed some child rights and privileges were very expressive on the subject of urban child poverty. We also noted low self-esteem, maladjustment, despair, poor housing, hazardous living conditions, stigma, lack of proper water sanitation and hygiene services, and anxiety among others which highlight the negative dynamics that poor children navigate. Findings also showed that adolescent parents were less competent in their parenting roles, given the circumstances leading to pregnancy and parenting. Such socio-economic demographics have been noted to be most likely to lead to further poverty [44]. The implication here is that, there is a need for investments in employment-creation activities, the provision and promotion of decent work that secures household income to meet individual and family-level needs along sustainable chains that enable good living conditions [31, 45–48].

The long-term effect of child poverty is that it creates developmental and sometimes systemic failures. For example, the deprivation of education, poor health (especially comorbidities) and nutrition, shelter, water, and sanitation, clothing, and protection (and other necessities) does not allow the children to grow into well-established adults. There is evidence that when a child grows up under conditions of deprivation, they are likely to become deprived adults with no capabilities to cater for their children and families [49].

In the context of most of Kampala being slum-like, it is important to note that an unsustainable built environment constrains children's access to urban services and leads to urban-specific environmental health problems that shift the focus from communicable to non-communicable diseases, which health support systems alone cannot address [50]. Urban child poverty means that poor children are at risk of suffering from waterborne illnesses, traffic injuries, toxic pollutants, airborne illnesses and other communicable illnesses because they are often overcrowded in small rooms. Taken together, urban child poverty affects their social, emotional, and cognitive outcome as well as their later adult life outcomes [51] while exposure to poverty induced childhood violence can lead to further and future poverty through aggravated risk-taking [8]. Violence against

children has been identified as a major hindrance to children's enjoyment of their rights and adulthood. Poor childhood and early life trauma tend to predispose children to chronic diseases and other developmental problems such as depression and anxiety [52].

The literature suggests that deep and persistent child poverty is undesirable since it compromises prospects for children and society. Children who experience the worst effects of poverty also tend to experience poor outcomes across important domains later in life [53]. We argue that child health and wellbeing are largely determined by the socio-economic conditions of parents, caretakers and guardians that characterize the environment in which they are born and grow up. This means that children who are born in poor conditions are more likely to inherit the poverty of their parents and grow up in the same conditions unless they are supported to break out of such conditions particularly through public social services that facilitate social mobility. The call in this paper is that children already in poverty should be supported to escape it, while those who are not poor should be protected by viable families and functional social services and institutions.

3.2 Resilience by urban poor children: a different view of child labour in a different context

Our understanding of resilience is being the process and outcome of successfully adapting to challenging life experiences. We learned that adverse childhood events made children resilient through repeated exposure to and contending with less-than-ideal family and life conditions, as demonstrated by pervasive poverty. However, in the face of these setbacks, some children had not resigned to their fate, and were tackling life head-on. Some of the urban poor children had kept in school, tried to keep off drugs, aspired to succeed and did all they could to stay connected with available opportunities without resorting to violence and crime. While childhood deprivation has the potential to inhibit normal intellectual, social, and emotional development among children, some children were able to take on adult roles including working (doing odd jobs such as cleaning latrines, carrying heavy loads, and being paid in kind) and taking care of children as well as adults/parents.

Consistent with our findings, other studies have documented children to cope with trauma in life that relates to orphanhood, abuse, and deprivation [54, 55]. Resilience was supported by faith institutions through prayer, counselling services, social services, and helpful individuals, as well as relatives who offered hope. Even in the face of misery, there was evidence of resilience, agency and some form of capability expressed in innovation and hard work by being leaders in their own right, where they were especially among their siblings and those that they supported. Even when in dire straits, there was some hope and optimism, especially among those children who were in school or trying to go back to school through hard work and persistence in pursuit of their goals.

It is important to note that not all work performed by children is child labour. The problem was that all interviewed children were engaged in child labour due to the acute needs and the roles they had to play, given the survival imperative. Here, we found child labour to be paradoxical. In some cases, some children were able to take care of their weak parents or fend for their siblings when the household was child-headed. A few children had been spotted and supported by well-wishers and charity by being taken in for proper care, some had been spotted and returned to school, skilled, and rehabilitated through life-changing mentorship. Part of these good changes were possible because

such children were in the marketplace of work interaction, the hazards notwithstanding. While the odds were high, there was supportive evidence that being able and willing to work in such a scenario of hard choices was better than not trying. Stepping out to work had a greater chance of success than not trying altogether.

Taken together, the complexities of child labor should be appreciated and explored further in context than merely seeking to end child labour in the pursuit of universal child rights. When children's rights are not ensured, child labour becomes a viable alternative and a lifeline to both the child and the family that the child supports. It is plausible that mere legislative compliance outlawing child labour and not making real progress in the provisioning of basic needs and rights could inadvertently have latent harm on poor children than the prevalent child labour that is seen as a chance at meeting basic needs. As a coping mechanism and resilience, children seek to work for independence and perceived safety including taking care of their dependents (including impaired parents and siblings). In the presence of adequate social security, protection, and public support in terms of better social services, child labour would have fewer merits. This means that the drivers of child labour need to be addressed beyond mere legislation. The best means of compliance are better choices and not better laws that have not worked as evidenced by the pervasive nature of child labour in poverty enclaves. The complexity of urban child poverty, street life, and the survival imperative are much more complex than merely drumming the legislative illegalities around child labour and its harmful effects [56]. From rational standpoint, child labor was seen as better than dying of poverty and its related debilitating effects. Rights without meeting basic needs is a contradiction of terms, especially that child labour is largely an indicator of poor economic status/poverty which tends to violate all rights without exception. Child labour is usually the best option out of many poor and bad alternative choices that are life threatening.

3.3 Reflections on study strengths and limitations

Child-centered research is premised on the understanding that children espouse agency and must be seen as human beings and not subjects in the process towards adulthood. The use of children's drawings showed that children were able to assert their agency through narratives of their lives visually, which reflects their ability to reflect on their experiences of urban poverty using drawings. Additionally, through this methodology, children were able to reveal and share the uncertainties they face when they experience urban poverty, the resilience mechanisms they must adopt as they endeavor to negotiate the challenges of urban childhood poverty. Focusing on content analysis and inter-coder reliability allowed the application of more credibility checks than the more projective methods. The individual child drawings and narratives about the drawings offering a creative, engaging, flexible and rare insights into children's lives, experiences, and thoughts. The flexibility of the drawing method facilitated variations to emerge since it was unthreatening, fun, suited for child participants, and require simple everyday drawing skills.

The study had limitations as well. This study was based on a sample selected from Kampala's urban setting and therefore draws from the perspectives of poor urban children in Kampala city. The inclusion of children from other urban authorities of Uganda should be considered in similar future studies. Furthermore, some children found the use of drawings to express their experiences strange and difficult. However, the research

team worked patiently and encouragingly with the children to attempt and complete the drawing and urged them (drawers) to talk about and communicate the message carried by their particular drawings. This enhanced the agency of the children and their participation. Some could argue that the drawings could have carried some bias since they were a form of self-reporting. However, this is a measure of what the children considered significant events in their lives [57]. Despite these limitations, the study represents the lived experiences of urban poor children in Kampala city.

3.4 Recommendations

Due to the deep-rooted structural inequalities, the benefits of urban living tend to bypass the most vulnerable children. One way to take meaningful action is for all stakeholders, including the private sector, to increase support to communities by reaching out to children in these spaces. There is a need to build on the available child rights initiatives in urban areas and elsewhere as a means to reduce the urban distortions [1]. This should tap the enormous potential of the private sector and civil society as partners on urban issues for children, for example, through social enterprise models for disadvantaged communities. The urban components of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development have given civil society organizations (CSOs) a prominent role to play in the development of urban areas, building on their existing presence and experience.

For continuity and progression, there is a need to continuously invest in research to capture the different experiences of urban vulnerable groups to underpin evidence-based urban programming. While many urban issues are identified in situational analyses, these should further be translated into urban programming and reflected in country programme documents (CPDs) across relevant sectors and goal areas such as the NDP4 and KCCA strategic plans. We argue that instead of sectoral, project-based approaches to urban child poverty, an integrated approach should be adopted. This has the strongest potential to demonstrate results in reducing urban child poverty and other urban disparities. For example, looking at employment to include housing, welfare for children, such as education, healthcare, recreation, family leisure, stability and safe zones that are free from pollution and other urban hazards. While this proposition may be seen as expensive, it ought to be reviewed as investing in the future of the nation, which is the children. To better use the scarce resources, we need to address parental poverty, and child poverty will be inadvertently addressed. We sound a warning that it is technically cheaper to mitigate these events than to invest in corrective actions in the future [58, 59].

There is a need to create an enabling environment for poor children to access education and stay in schools as a tool to break out of the poverty trap [60, 61]. Despite high levels of enrolment in schools throughout the country under the UPE program, many children end up dropping out of school due to challenges concerning hidden school costs, physical violence, abusive teachers, and other factors. Thus, for UPE and other forms of education to be of benefit to poor children, interventions need to go beyond tuition and functional fees supports to include basic scholastic support such as books, pens, and teachers, and add the critical access to school feeding, school nutrition, personal hygiene, and menstrual hygiene for girls.

It is also important for children to be taken as core stakeholders in policy and practice actions that address urban-child poverty. Our findings illustrated that children who participated in the study were actively and variably engaged in many forms of tackling urban child poverty. This agency should not be lost in child protectionism but should be identified,

supported, and harnessed through appropriate child engagements. The finding that child labor offered children in urban-poverty survival pathways implies that new lenses of looking at problems in context are necessary. It also offers a possibility of delivering working solutions to child urban poverty in specific urban contexts such as Kampala.

4 Conclusion

Urban child poverty is a multidimensional social issue, caused by factors affecting children at individual, household, and community levels. Children were singular in the exposition of the multidimensionality of urban child poverty. They articulated linkages of child poverty to poor life chances driven by ill health, limitations in food access, limited educational opportunities, household and community conflicts, and a sheer inadequacy of shelter. The pervasive deprivation also revealed the interrelationship amongst different factors that create a web that puts children in disadvantageous positions. To deal with the urban child poverty challenge, households need to be empowered as part of the efforts to build resilient communities to shield children from drivers and effects of child poverty. The wealth of cities – their infrastructure, and their greater availability of goods, services, resources, and functioning commodity markets—should provide the opportunity to achieve results for children at scale. When parents are gainfully employed with the right attitude to life, they will be able to earn a living that supports their children. Therefore, to address child poverty, addressing parental and more importantly family poverty is key.

Our findings illustrate that children themselves are key actors in tackling child-urban poverty in urban Kampala. This implies that, children in many other contexts hold the potential and agency in tackling the poverty conditions in which they find themselves. As such, directly consulting, learning from, and working with children in poverty policy and programming is essential.

It is important to re-assess, in context, certain conditions that may be commonly construed as problems impacting children in poverty. The findings illustrate that children engaged in child labor had found pathways to meet their basic needs that would otherwise be impossible. As such, through methods that engage directly with children, actors can be able to identify possibilities even in difficult conditions and create fresh opportunities.

A participatory and community-based methodology of studying and understanding the experiences of children on child-urban poverty offers perspectives that other methodologies may not easily have access to. Its strength is in centering children as sources of knowledge and insights, protected and supported through the research processes of engaging community gate keepers and leaders. It offers creative child friendly methods that combine art, interviews, talking, and reflection by children themselves to access and share their thoughts. Our approach of using community ethics offer a novel avenue of ethical research beyond structured ethical committees, by particularly recognizing the power of community ethics in research processes. This is especially important in contexts where study sites are embedded in the community, and where such structured committees many not be readily available to researchers. Future researchers are therefore encouraged to adopt and build on such methods to improve research with children and have access to the knowledge, experiences, and conceptualization that they hold.

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Author contributions

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Data availability

All supporting data has been used and submitted in the manuscript.

Declarations**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The study used community ethics processes. Community gate keepers' approvals were obtained. Participants' consent and assent were obtained.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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