

# Empowering Street Children in Zimbabwe for Sustainable Development: A Critical Analysis of Angel of Hope Foundation Strategic Initiatives

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## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the effectiveness of the Angel of Hope Foundation's (AOHF) strategic initiatives in empowering street children in Zimbabwe within a complex socio-ecological context. Using a qualitative case study design based on a systematic desk review of scholarly and policy literature, the study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Findings indicate that streetism is driven by interconnected structural and socio-behavioural factors, including poverty, family disintegration, and survival-oriented agency. Street children experience multidimensional vulnerabilities spanning health risks, exploitation, and social exclusion. The study demonstrates that AOHF's integrated intervention model—combining non-formal education, vocational training, and psychosocial support—enhances reintegration and resilience. However, its long-term impact is constrained by systemic challenges, including weak policy coordination and resource limitations. The study contributes to the literature by conceptualising streetism as an adaptive, structurally embedded phenomenon and by demonstrating the value of integrated, multi-level interventions. It recommends strengthened policy alignment, cross-sector collaboration, and scalable intervention frameworks to achieve sustainable outcomes.

**Keywords:** Street children; sustainable development; Zimbabwe; ecological systems; social protection

## INTRODUCTION

Street children remain one of the most visible manifestations of structural inequality and social exclusion in contemporary societies. Despite global commitments to child protection and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), millions of children continue to live and work on the streets under conditions that undermine their well-being, agency, and long-term development trajectories (United Nations, 2020; UNICEF, 2023). Recent scholarship increasingly frames streetism not merely as a welfare concern but as a reflection of systemic failures in social protection, governance, and inclusive development (Thomas de Benítez, 2022; Consortium for Street Children, 2023).

Critically, streetism persists at the intersection of structural deprivation and adaptive agency, where children navigate street life not only as victims of circumstance but as active agents responding to constrained socio-economic environments. This perspective challenges deficit-oriented approaches and calls for more nuanced, systems-based interventions.

In Zimbabwe, the phenomenon has intensified within a context of prolonged economic instability, urbanisation, and social dislocation (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank, 2023). While government and non-state actors, including faith-based organisations, have implemented various interventions, questions remain regarding their effectiveness, scalability, and long-term sustainability.

This study critically examines the strategic initiatives of the Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF) in empowering street children within a socio-ecological framework. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study argues that sustainable empowerment requires integrated, multi-level interventions that address both

immediate vulnerabilities and the structural conditions that reproduce streetism. In doing so, it contributes to emerging debates on systems-based approaches to child protection and inclusive development.

## Background

The phenomenon of street children remains a persistent global challenge, with estimates suggesting that up to 150 million children live or work on the streets worldwide (United Nations, 2020; Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). However, recent studies emphasise that these figures are inherently fluid due to definitional ambiguities, mobility patterns, and the hidden nature of street-connected populations (Consortium for Street Children, 2023; UNHRC, 2012). Street children are present across both developing and developed contexts, although their concentration and vulnerability are more pronounced in low- and middle-income countries (Darragh, 2019; Thomas de Benítez, 2022).

In Zimbabwe, estimates indicate that between 3,000 and 4,701 children live and work on the streets, particularly in urban centres such as Harare and Bulawayo (MPSSLW, 2017; UNICEF, 2020). Recent economic analyses suggest that prolonged macroeconomic instability, high unemployment, and weakened social safety nets continue to exacerbate child vulnerability and family disintegration (World Bank, 2023). The enduring impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic further contribute to orphanhood and household fragility, reinforcing pathways into street life (Gunhidzirai, 2020).

Street-connected children experience intersecting vulnerabilities, including exposure to violence, exploitation, substance abuse, and limited access to education and healthcare (Khan & Hossain, 2015; UNICEF, 2023). Emerging evidence highlights the cumulative and long-term effects of these vulnerabilities on children's developmental outcomes, including mental health challenges, disrupted education, and social exclusion (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2023).

Importantly, the persistence of streetism reflects not only individual or household-level failures but broader systemic and institutional gaps in policy implementation, service delivery, and social protection systems. This reinforces the need for interventions that operate across multiple ecological levels.

In response, a range of actors—including government, civil society, and faith-based organisations—have implemented programmes targeting education, rehabilitation, and livelihood support. The Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF) represents one such intervention model, combining non-formal education, vocational training, and psychosocial support. While these initiatives show promise, their long-term effectiveness and scalability remain underexplored, particularly within a systems-based analytical framework.

## Aim

To critically evaluate the effectiveness of the Angel of Hope Foundation's (AOHF) strategic interventions in empowering street children for sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

## Objectives

- To analyse the structural and socio-economic drivers of streetism in Zimbabwe
- To examine the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of street children in urban contexts
- To assess the effectiveness of AOHF's integrated intervention model
- To identify policy and programmatic strategies for enhancing sustainable outcomes and scalability

## Research Questions

1. What structural and socio-economic factors drive children into street life in Zimbabwe?
2. How do street children experience and navigate vulnerability in urban contexts?

3. To what extent do AOHF's strategic interventions promote sustainable empowerment and reintegration?
4. What policy and programmatic reforms are required to strengthen intervention effectiveness and scalability?

### **Significance of the study**

This study contributes to both scholarship and practice by advancing an integrated understanding of streetism as a structurally embedded and adaptive phenomenon. It provides empirical and conceptual insights into the role of faith-based organisations in delivering multi-dimensional interventions within resource-constrained contexts.

By applying an ecological systems perspective, the study bridges micro-level experiences with macro-level policy dynamics, offering a robust framework for analysing intervention effectiveness across multiple levels. In doing so, it shifts the discourse from fragmented, welfare-oriented responses toward systems-based, sustainable solutions.

The findings have practical relevance for policymakers, development practitioners, and civil society organisations seeking scalable and context-responsive strategies for addressing child vulnerability and promoting inclusive development in Zimbabwe and comparable settings.

### **Problem statement**

The increasing prevalence of street children in Zimbabwe represents a critical socio-economic and humanitarian challenge that undermines national development, social cohesion, and the effectiveness of child protection systems. Street-connected children are exposed to multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities, including exploitation, hazardous labour, substance abuse, violence, and limited access to education and healthcare (Darragh, 2019). These conditions are closely associated with poverty, family breakdown, orphanhood—often linked to the HIV/AIDS epidemic—and broader economic instability (Gunhidzirai, 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

Despite the adoption of a whole-of-government and community-based approach, existing interventions remain fragmented, under-resourced, and insufficiently coordinated. Moreover, there is limited empirical and analytical evidence assessing the effectiveness, scalability, and sustainability of interventions implemented by non-state actors, particularly faith-based organisations such as the Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF).

This gap in evidence constrains both policy development and programme design, resulting in interventions that are often reactive rather than systemic. Accordingly, this study critically evaluates AOHF's strategic initiatives to determine their contribution to sustainable empowerment and reintegration of street children within Zimbabwe's broader socio-ecological context.

### **Theoretical framework**

This study is anchored in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1988), which conceptualises child development as a function of interactions within nested and interrelated environmental systems. The theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how multiple layers of influence shape the lived experiences, vulnerabilities, and developmental outcomes of street-connected children.

At the micro-system level, the child's immediate environment—including family, peers, and school—plays a direct role in shaping behaviour and well-being. Disruptions within this system, such as family breakdown, abuse, and neglect, significantly increase children's vulnerability to street life.

The meso-system captures the interactions between micro-level environments, such as relationships between family and school. Weak or dysfunctional linkages within this system can limit access to support structures and reinforce pathways into marginalisation.

The exo-system encompasses broader institutional and structural contexts that indirectly influence the child, including social services, economic conditions, and policy environments. In contexts characterised by poverty,

unemployment, and weak social protection systems, children are more likely to experience heightened vulnerability.

At the macro-system level, cultural norms, societal values, and national policy frameworks shape broader patterns of inclusion or exclusion. Stigma, discrimination, and inadequate policy implementation contribute to the marginalisation of street children and limit access to opportunities.

Finally, the chrono-system reflects the dimension of time, capturing how life transitions and socio-economic changes—such as economic crises or the long-term impacts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic—shape children’s developmental trajectories.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to the present study as it enables a multi-level analysis of streetism, highlighting how individual experiences are shaped by interconnected social, economic, and institutional systems. It also provides a foundation for analysing how integrated interventions, such as those implemented by AOHF, can disrupt pathways into vulnerability and promote sustainable empowerment.

### Conceptual framework

Building on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, this study develops a conceptual framework that integrates drivers of streetism, ecological dimensions of vulnerability, intervention strategies, and sustainable development outcomes.

At the foundational level, the framework identifies push and pull factors as key drivers of streetism. Push factors—including poverty, family breakdown, abuse, and economic instability—create conditions that compel children into street life. Pull factors—such as perceived economic opportunities, peer influence, and the search for autonomy—reinforce children’s continued engagement with street environments.

These drivers operate within multi-layered ecological systems, where vulnerabilities are produced and sustained. At the micro level, disrupted family and peer systems increase exposure to risk. At the meso and exo levels, weak institutional support and limited access to education, healthcare, and social services exacerbate marginalisation. At the macro level, broader socio-economic conditions and policy gaps reinforce systemic exclusion.

Within this context, AOHF’s strategic interventions function as mediating mechanisms. These include:

- Non-formal education and literacy programmes
- Vocational skills training and livelihood support
- Psychosocial support and rehabilitation services
- Community-based reintegration and family reunification

These interventions operate across ecological levels to address both immediate needs and structural barriers. By enhancing resilience, restoring social connections, and promoting economic participation, they aim to disrupt the cycle of streetism.

The ultimate outcome of this interaction is **sustainable empowerment**, reflected in improved well-being, social reintegration, and long-term socio-economic inclusion.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework demonstrates the dynamic interaction between structural drivers, ecological systems, and intervention strategies in shaping empowerment outcomes for street children in Zimbabwe.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Empowering Street Children in Zimbabwe

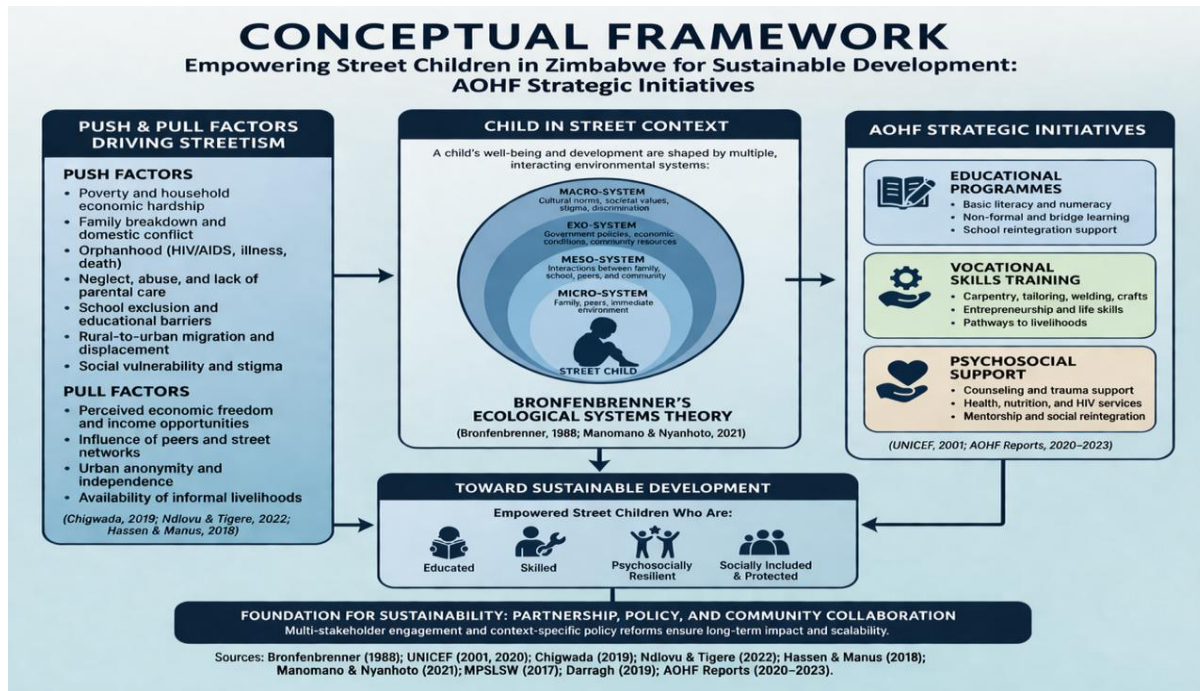


Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating the interaction between push-pull factors, ecological systems, AOHF interventions, and sustainable development outcomes.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising Street Children

The concept of street children has evolved to reflect the complexity and diversity of children lived experiences in street situations. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2017) defines “children in street situations” as those who depend on the streets for survival, whether living or working there, either alone or with peers or family. This definition represents a shift from static categorisation towards a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding.

Recent scholarship reinforces this shift by emphasising the fluidity and heterogeneity of street-connected children, highlighting that their identities and experiences are shaped by changing socio-economic conditions and mobility patterns (Consortium for Street Children, 2023; Thomas de Benítez, 2022). Scholars further argue that street children exist along a continuum of street involvement rather than as a uniform category (Darragh, 2019). While some maintain intermittent family connections, others are fully detached from familial support systems—a distinction critical for designing targeted interventions (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022).

### Theoretical Perspectives on Street Children

Street children’s experiences are best understood through multidimensional frameworks that capture the interaction of social, economic, and environmental influences. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1988) provides a robust analytical lens for examining these dynamics.

At the micro level, family structures, peer relationships, and school environments directly influence child development. At the meso and exo levels, institutional weaknesses and socio-economic conditions shape exposure to risk. At the macro level, broader cultural norms, policy environments, and structural inequalities reinforce patterns of marginalisation (Manomano & Nyanhoto, 2021).

Recent studies further emphasise that child vulnerability emerges from the interaction of multiple systems rather than isolated risk factors, reinforcing the relevance of ecological approaches in analysing street-connected children (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

This ecological perspective highlights that vulnerability is produced through interacting systems, thereby necessitating multi-level and integrated intervention approaches.

### **Push and Pull Factors Driving Streetism**

The literature consistently identifies a combination of push and pull factors influencing children's transition to street life.

Push factors are primarily rooted in structural deprivation and household instability. These include poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, abuse, and orphanhood—often linked to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Kassaw, 2019; Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022). Recent evidence suggests that economic shocks, inflation, and weakening social protection systems continue to intensify these pressures in many developing contexts, including Zimbabwe (World Bank, 2023).

Conversely, pull factors relate to perceived opportunities associated with street life, including economic independence, peer influence, and access to informal income-generating activities (Hassen & Manus, 2018). Emerging literature highlights that these factors are increasingly shaped by urbanisation and informal economies, which create both opportunities and risks for vulnerable children (Consortium for Street Children, 2023).

The interaction between push and pull factors underscores that streetism is both structurally induced and socially reinforced, reflecting a complex interplay between constraint and agency.

### **Challenges and Vulnerabilities of Street Children**

Street children face multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities that significantly affect their physical, psychological, and social well-being. These include exposure to violence, exploitation, substance abuse, and health risks such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Khan & Hossain, 2015; Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022).

Recent global evidence indicates that street-connected children experience disproportionately high levels of mental health challenges, including trauma, depression, and anxiety, often linked to prolonged exposure to adverse environments (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2023; UNICEF, 2023). In addition, social exclusion and stigma continue to limit access to essential services such as education and healthcare (Darragh, 2019).

These findings highlight that vulnerability among street children is cumulative and systemic, requiring interventions that address both immediate protection needs and long-term developmental outcomes.

### **Intervention Strategies for Street Children**

Effective interventions for street children require integrated and multi-dimensional approaches. Education is widely recognised as a critical pathway for reintegration and long-term empowerment (UNESCO, 2002).

Non-formal education programmes provide flexible learning opportunities that enable street children to transition into formal schooling or vocational pathways (The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2023). Recent studies emphasise the importance of adaptive and inclusive education models that respond to the unique needs of marginalised children in unstable environments (UNICEF, 2023).

Vocational training initiatives—such as agriculture, carpentry, and entrepreneurship—support sustainable livelihood development, particularly in contexts characterised by high youth unemployment (World Bank, 2023). Psychosocial support, including counselling and mentorship, remains essential in addressing trauma and building resilience (UNICEF, 2001).

Evidence increasingly suggests that holistic, integrated interventions are more effective than fragmented approaches in achieving sustainable outcomes for street-connected children.

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## Role of Faith-Based and Community Organisations

Faith-based organisations (FBOs) play a critical role in supporting vulnerable children, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Their strong community presence and social capital enable them to implement contextually relevant and culturally responsive interventions (Belshaw et al., 2005).

Recent studies highlight the growing importance of non-state actors in complementing state capacity, particularly in fragile and resource-constrained environments (Consortium for Street Children, 2023; World Bank, 2023). In Zimbabwe, organisations such as the Angel of Hope Foundation provide integrated services that include education, health support, and economic empowerment (Makuwaza, 2020; Munyati, 2018).

However, persistent challenges—including limited funding, weak coordination, and inadequate policy support—continue to constrain the scalability and sustainability of such initiatives.

### Policy and Legal Framework

At the global level, frameworks such as the United Nations Resolution on the Plight of Street Children (1992) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasise the protection and welfare of vulnerable children.

Recent policy discourse emphasises the need for integrated and systems-based child protection approaches that align social protection, education, and health systems (UNICEF, 2023). In Zimbabwe, while the Constitution guarantees children's rights, implementation gaps persist, limiting the effectiveness of these frameworks (Duci & Tahsini, 2016).

This disconnect between policy intent and implementation underscores the need for stronger institutional coordination and accountability mechanisms.

### Research Gap

Although existing literature provides substantial insights into the causes, challenges, and interventions associated with street children, there is limited research evaluating the effectiveness of specific intervention models, particularly those implemented by faith-based organisations in Zimbabwe.

Moreover, recent scholarship calls for more integrated analytical frameworks that link structural drivers, lived experiences, and intervention outcomes (Consortium for Street Children, 2023; Thomas de Benítez, 2022). This study responds to this gap by critically analysing AOHF's strategic initiatives through an ecological systems lens, thereby contributing to both theoretical advancement and policy-relevant knowledge.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to facilitate an in-depth and contextually grounded analysis of the Angel of Hope Foundation's (AOHF) strategic initiatives in empowering street children in Zimbabwe. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for examining complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, where the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred. It enables a holistic exploration of intervention processes, outcomes, and contextual influences.

### Research Paradigm

The study is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which assumes that social realities are socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped by human experiences and interactions. This paradigm is well-suited to exploring the lived realities of street children and the meanings embedded in intervention strategies within specific socio-economic and policy environments.

By adopting a constructivist lens, the study prioritises interpretation over measurement, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how empowerment processes are experienced and constructed within complex ecological systems.

### **Data Sources and Collection**

The study is based on secondary data obtained through a systematic desk review of diverse and credible sources. These include:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Government policy documents and official reports
- Publications from international organisations (e.g., UNICEF, United Nations, World Bank)
- Reports from non-governmental and faith-based organisations, including AOHF
- Relevant grey literature (e.g., conference papers, policy briefs, and media reports)

Sources were purposively selected based on their relevance, credibility, recency, and contribution to understanding the dynamics of street children and intervention strategies in Zimbabwe and comparable contexts

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic and iterative process:

1. Familiarisation with the data through repeated reading
2. Initial coding of key concepts and recurring patterns
3. Identification and refinement of emerging themes
4. Categorisation and interpretation of themes in relation to the research objectives

The analysis focused on three core thematic areas:

- Drivers of streetism (push and pull factors)
- Lived experiences and vulnerabilities of street children
- Intervention strategies and their outcomes

To enhance analytical depth, themes were interpreted through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, enabling the study to link individual experiences with broader structural and institutional dynamics.

### **Case Study Focus: Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF)**

The Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF) was purposively selected as the focal case due to its prominence in Zimbabwe's child protection landscape and its implementation of integrated, multi-dimensional interventions. Its programmes, encompassing education, vocational training, and psychosocial support, provide a relevant and illustrative model for analysing pathways to sustainable empowerment and social reintegration.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigour**

To ensure the credibility, dependability, and analytical rigour of the study, several strategies were employed:

- **Data triangulation:** Use of multiple sources to validate findings and minimise bias

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- **Thematic coherence:** Systematic coding and iterative refinement of themes
  - **Source credibility:** Inclusion of peer-reviewed and institutional publications
  - **Theoretical alignment:** Consistent application of an established analytical framework

These measures strengthen the robustness of the findings and enhance confidence in the study's interpretations.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As the study is based exclusively on secondary data, it did not involve direct interaction with human participants. Nonetheless, ethical standards were strictly maintained through:

- Proper citation and acknowledgment of all sources
- Use of credible and publicly accessible data
- Avoidance of misrepresentation, bias, or distortion of findings

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully capture current, localised, or nuanced lived experiences of street children. The absence of primary empirical data constrains the depth of contextual insight and limits the ability to generalise findings.

However, the study mitigates these limitations through the use of diverse, credible sources and a systematic analytical approach, providing meaningful and theoretically grounded insights into the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Findings**

This section presents the key findings of the study, organised thematically and explicitly aligned with the research questions. The findings are derived from a systematic analysis of secondary data and the case of the Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF), interpreted within an ecological systems framework.

#### **Drivers of Streetism in Zimbabwe**

The findings reveal that streetism in Zimbabwe is driven by a dynamic interplay of structural (push) and socio-behavioural (pull) factors, reflecting both constraint and agency.

Push factors are predominantly rooted in socio-economic deprivation. Poverty, unemployment, and economic instability emerged as primary drivers, often compounded by family breakdown, domestic violence, neglect, and orphanhood, frequently linked to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These conditions create environments in which children are compelled to leave home as a survival response rather than a voluntary choice.

Conversely, pull factors include perceived opportunities associated with street life, such as engagement in informal income-generating activities (e.g., vending and car guarding), peer influence, and the promise of autonomy. While these factors provide short-term coping mechanisms, they simultaneously reinforce long-term vulnerability and exposure to risk.

Taken together, these findings suggest that streetism is not merely a consequence of individual decision-making, but a structurally embedded survival strategy shaped by the interaction between deprivation and adaptive agency.

#### **Lived Experiences and Vulnerabilities of Street Children**

The study finds that street children experience multi-dimensional and intersecting vulnerabilities that significantly affect their physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Children living on the streets are highly exposed to:

- Violence and exploitation, including sexual abuse
- Substance abuse and high-risk survival behaviours
- Health risks, including HIV/AIDS and other infections
- Social exclusion, stigma, and discrimination

The absence of stable family structures and protective systems further exacerbates these vulnerabilities. Many children experience prolonged exposure to trauma, which manifests in long-term psychological challenges such as anxiety, depression, and emotional distress.

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that vulnerability is not only individual but structurally produced, arising from weak social protection systems and limited access to essential services such as education and healthcare.

### **Effectiveness of AOHF Strategic Interventions**

The findings indicate that AOHF's interventions make a significant contribution to the empowerment and reintegration of street children, particularly through an integrated and multi-dimensional support model.

Key intervention areas include:

#### **a) Educational Support**

AOHF facilitates access to basic education, literacy, and non-formal learning programmes. These initiatives enhance children's capacity to transition into formal education systems and improve long-term developmental trajectories.

#### **b) Vocational Skills Training**

Programmes such as agriculture, poultry production, and entrepreneurship equip beneficiaries with practical, income-generating skills. These interventions reduce reliance on street-based survival strategies and promote economic self-reliance.

#### **c) Psychosocial Support**

Counselling, mentorship, and rehabilitation programmes address trauma and emotional distress, contributing to improved mental well-being and social reintegration.

#### **d) Community-Based Support Systems**

AOHF collaborates with local authorities and communities to facilitate family reunification and promote social inclusion.

Collectively, these interventions reflect a holistic and context-responsive model that aligns with ecological systems thinking by addressing both individual needs (micro-level) and environmental conditions (meso-level).

However, the findings also indicate that the scale, reach, and sustainability of these interventions remain constrained by resource limitations and broader systemic challenges.

### **Gaps and Systemic Constraints**

Despite the positive impact of AOHF initiatives, several critical systemic constraints persist:

- **Fragmented policy implementation:** Weak coordination between government and non-state actors limits overall effectiveness
- **Resource constraints:** Financial and infrastructural limitations hinder programme scalability
- **Limited coverage:** Existing interventions reach only a fraction of affected children
- **Weak reintegration systems:** Inconsistent family tracing and inadequate long-term support mechanisms

These findings suggest that while AOHF operates effectively at the **micro and meso levels**, broader **macro-level constraints**—including policy gaps and economic instability—continue to undermine sustainable impact.

### Synthesis of Findings

The findings collectively demonstrate that streetism in Zimbabwe is a multi-layered and systemically produced phenomenon, emerging from the interaction of structural deprivation, social dynamics, and institutional limitations.

Three key insights emerge:

1. Streetism is driven by the interaction of push (structural) and pull (adaptive) factors, reflecting both constraint and agency.
2. Vulnerabilities experienced by street children are cumulative, intersecting, and structurally embedded, rather than isolated individual conditions.
3. Effective interventions—such as those implemented by AOHF—require integrated, multi-level approaches that address immediate needs while simultaneously engaging broader systemic drivers.

Overall, the findings reinforce the central argument of this study: sustainable empowerment of street children depends on aligning community-based interventions with broader policy, economic, and institutional reforms.

### Discussion and Policy Implications: A Critical Systems-Based Synthesis

This study critically evaluated the effectiveness of the Angel of Hope Foundation's (AOHF) interventions within a socio-ecological framework. Building directly on the Results, the discussion synthesises evidence across the four research questions to interrogate not only effectiveness, but also conditions, limitations, and systemic implications. Three core insights emerge: (1) streetism as a structure–agency phenomenon, (2) the conditional and uneven effectiveness of integrated interventions, and (3) the decisive role of macro-level constraints in shaping sustainability and scalability.

#### Streetism as a Structure–Agency Phenomenon

Consistent with the findings on push and pull factors, streetism in Zimbabwe is strongly rooted in structural deprivation, including poverty, unemployment, and family disintegration (Ndlovu & Tigere, 2022; World Bank, 2023). These drivers are further compounded by the long-term socio-economic effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and weakening social protection systems (Gunhidzirai, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). However, the Results also demonstrate that street-connected children actively navigate these constraints through adaptive strategies, including informal income generation and peer-based survival networks.

This duality reinforces emerging scholarship that conceptualises street children as both structurally constrained and agentially responsive (Thomas de Benítez, 2022; Consortium for Street Children, 2023). While agency provides short-term coping mechanisms, it simultaneously entrenches long-term vulnerability through exposure to violence, substance abuse, and social exclusion (Khan & Hossain, 2015; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings validate Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as an appropriate analytical lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1988), while also suggesting the need for greater integration of agency-sensitive perspectives. Vulnerability is not located solely at the individual level but is produced through interactions across micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems (Manomano & Nyanhoto, 2021; UNICEF, 2023). This reinforces the argument that effective interventions must operate across multiple ecological levels simultaneously.

### **Effectiveness of Integrated Interventions: Evidence and Limits**

The Results indicate that AOHF's integrated intervention model, combining education, vocational training, and psychosocial support, contributes meaningfully to reintegration and improved well-being. This aligns with global evidence that holistic interventions are more effective than fragmented approaches in addressing complex child vulnerabilities (UNESCO, 2002; UNICEF, 2001; The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, 2023).

Education emerges as a central pathway for long-term empowerment, facilitating reintegration into formal systems and improving life trajectories (UNESCO, 2002). Similarly, vocational training supports livelihood development in contexts characterised by high unemployment (World Bank, 2023), while psychosocial interventions address trauma and enhance adaptive capacity (UNICEF, 2001).

However, a critical synthesis of the findings reveals that the effectiveness of integrated models is conditional rather than universal.

First, outcomes depend on ecological alignment. Interventions are most effective when individual-level gains (e.g., skills, education, psychosocial recovery) are reinforced by supportive family, community, and institutional environments. Weak reintegration systems, identified in the Results, undermine the durability of these gains.

Second, integrated interventions may generate unintended consequences. For example, vocational training without corresponding labour market opportunities may result in underemployment, while reintegration into unstable households may re-expose children to risk (Duci & Tahsini, 2016; Kassaw, 2019). These dynamics highlight the importance of contextual fit rather than assuming uniform effectiveness.

Third, integration introduces resource and coordination burdens. Holistic programmes require sustained funding, skilled personnel, and inter-institutional coordination, which are often limited in resource-constrained settings (Makuwaza, 2020; World Bank, 2023). This raises important questions about cost-effectiveness and scalability.

Taken together, these findings suggest that integrated models should be understood not as universally optimal solutions, but as context-dependent interventions whose success is mediated by systemic conditions.

### **Conceptual Precision and Measurement Gaps**

A cross-cutting issue emerging from the analysis is the limited operationalisation of key constructs such as empowerment, resilience, and sustainability. While widely used in both the literature and this study, these concepts are often applied in broad, normative terms without clear empirical indicators.

For instance, empowerment is reflected in improved access to education, psychosocial well-being, and economic participation, yet the absence of measurable indicators—such as school retention rates, income stability, or long-term reintegration outcomes—limits the ability to rigorously assess impact (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Similarly, resilience is insufficiently specified in terms of measurable adaptive capacities, while sustainability is often conflated between programme continuity and long-term beneficiary outcomes.

Addressing these gaps requires the development of indicator-based evaluation frameworks that translate abstract constructs into measurable dimensions. Such frameworks would enhance comparability, strengthen methodological rigour, and improve policy relevance.

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## Systemic Constraints and the Limits of Localised Success

The findings on systemic constraints highlight a critical disconnect between micro-level intervention success and macro-level structural realities. While AOHF demonstrates effectiveness at the community level, its impact is constrained by broader institutional and economic conditions.

Key challenges include fragmented policy implementation, weak coordination between state and non-state actors, limited funding, and macroeconomic instability (Duci & Tahsini, 2016; World Bank, 2023). These constraints limit both the scale and sustainability of interventions, reinforcing the conclusion that programme-level success does not automatically translate into systemic change.

This aligns with broader critiques in development literature, which caution against over-reliance on NGO-led interventions in the absence of strong institutional frameworks (Consortium for Street Children, 2023). AOHF's model is effective within its operational scope but remains structurally bounded by factors beyond its control.

### Policy and Practice Implications

The synthesis of findings points to several critical implications for policy and practice:

#### 1. Shift from reactive to preventive systems

Policy responses must move beyond rehabilitation toward addressing root causes, including poverty, family instability, and gaps in social protection systems (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

#### 2. Strengthen multi-sectoral coordination

Effective intervention requires alignment across education, health, social protection, and labour systems. Fragmentation, identified in the Results, remains a key barrier to impact.

#### 3. Embed non-state actors within formal systems

Faith-based organisations such as AOHF should be integrated into national policy frameworks through structured partnerships, funding mechanisms, and accountability systems (Belshaw et al., 2005; Makuwaza, 2020).

#### 4. Prioritise scalability and contextual adaptability

Interventions must be designed with scalability in mind, balancing depth (holistic support) with reach. This may require modular or phased approaches rather than fully integrated models in all contexts.

#### 5. Develop metrics-driven evaluation systems

Standardised indicators for empowerment, resilience, and sustainability are essential for improving programme evaluation and evidence-based policymaking.

### Theoretical Contribution

This study advances an integrated ecological–adaptive systems perspective on streetism and intervention effectiveness. It contributes to the literature by demonstrating that:

- Streetism is simultaneously structurally produced and agentially navigated
- Vulnerability is generated through interactions across ecological systems
- Intervention effectiveness is conditional, relational, and context-dependent

By linking empirical findings to systems theory, the study moves beyond linear models of intervention impact and provides a more nuanced framework for analysing complex social problems.

## Synthesis

Overall, the discussion underscores that sustainable empowerment cannot be achieved through isolated programme interventions alone. While AOHF represents a strong model of integrated support, its long-term impact is contingent upon alignment with broader policy, institutional, and economic systems.

Addressing streetism in Zimbabwe therefore, requires a systems-based approach that integrates micro-level interventions with macro-level reforms. Without such alignment, even the most effective programmes risk producing localised and temporary gains rather than sustained transformation.

## CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the role of the Angel of Hope Foundation (AOHF) in empowering street children in Zimbabwe within a complex socio-ecological context. The findings demonstrate that streetism is a structurally embedded and systemically reproduced phenomenon, driven by interrelated factors including poverty, family breakdown, and institutional limitations. While street life may provide short-term coping mechanisms, it ultimately entrenches vulnerability and social exclusion.

The study highlights that AOHF's integrated intervention model—combining education, vocational training, and psychosocial support—offers a viable pathway for reintegration and sustainable empowerment. However, the effectiveness and scalability of such interventions are constrained by broader structural challenges, including fragmented policy implementation, limited resources, and weak institutional coordination.

The study concludes that sustainable solutions require a shift from fragmented, reactive interventions towards coordinated, systems-based approaches that address both immediate needs and underlying structural drivers. Strengthening collaboration between government, civil society, and community-based organisations is essential for scaling impact and ensuring long-term outcomes.

Ultimately, the empowerment of street children in Zimbabwe depends not only on programme-level effectiveness but on the alignment of interventions with broader processes of socio-economic transformation, inclusive policy development, and strengthened social protection systems.

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