



HELLO!

Hello and a warm welcome to the latest issue of Street Life, your Toybox magazine.

As we start this new year, I want to take this opportunity to briefly reflect on 2020 and express my sincerest thanks to you, our incredible supporters, for your continued commitment to Toybox. You have been a shining light in what was undoubtedly an incredibly challenging year. Your unfaltering kindness and compassion for the children we are here to help, alongside your regular and heartfelt messages of support for our partners overseas and Team Toybox here in the UK, were such an encouragement and inspiration to us all. Thank you.

Most recently, we have been truly blessed by your response to our Christmas appeal. Which, at the time of going to print, has raised over **£298,000** to help register street children with their birth certificates. This is such an incredible achievement.

As I write this and reflect on the enormity of what will be possible thanks to your support, I have been picturing a huge birthday cake covered in candles. Each of these shining candles represents a child who now has their birth certificate and, for the first time in their lives, will be able to celebrate their official birthdays this year. It's an incredible feeling

to know that, thanks to you, these children will now officially exist in the eyes of society and that they will finally be acknowledged and seen. Now that is definitely something for us all to celebrate!

Inside this edition of Street Life, you can read more about how and why we extended our work into Sierra Leone, where for just over two years we have partnered with a fantastic local organisation in Freetown to support street children to access education. Albert, 14, pictured on the front cover, is one of the children currently supported by this project.

Like many of the street children we work with, having fled from a violent and abusive homelife, Albert's reason for being on the streets is an all too familiar story. It's heart-breaking to think this young boy (who is the same age as my own teenage son), has already had to endure so much in his young life.

Life on the streets of Freetown is tough and Albert struggles to earn enough to support himself.

And this struggle for survival has only been made harder by the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent government imposed restrictions. On a 'good' day, Albert can earn the equivalent of around £3 as a store labourer, moving rubbish from site-to-site. But this small amount is in no way guaranteed, and he recently admitted to our partners, "I am sad when I don't have anything to survive on a daily basis." Albert became involved in the education project in April 2019 and has been receiving psychosocial support. The team have also helped him to enrol back into school so he can begin to fulfil his dream of completing his education and joining the army.



Street children trying to enrol or return to school often have many barriers in their way and, in recent months, our partner explained that the process has been even more challenging for them as school authorities have been requesting children's school progression reports - something street children simply don't have. Despite these barriers, in the last three months alone, the team have been able to finalise the enrolments of 100 children into school. These children were also provided support with uniforms, bags, books and stationery. This really is a great success, particularly given that this has been achieved during the pandemic when our partner has faced steep challenges just to keep going. What a testament to both their determination and resilience!

Here at Toybox we have so much to be thankful for and my gratitude extends to every one of you. Without you none of this would be possible. The last financial year was one of our toughest ever, yet thanks to your support, we continued to work with eight partners in seven countries and our projects reached nearly



45,000 young people and their families. You can read about our year in more detail in our latest Annual Report which you can find on our website www.toybox.org.uk/about/finances

Once again, thank you so much for everything you do to support our work, you really do bring so much joy to Toybox and to street children around the world. I really hope you enjoy this issue of the magazine.

Yours,

Lynne Morris, CEO



To see all our latest news and for regular updates, please visit our website www.toybox.org.uk



BUILDING FOUNDATIONS IN FREETOWN

Toybox in Sierra Leone – how it all began

In a country where only 66% of children finish primary school, lack of access to education is one of the major issues affecting street children in Sierra Leone. Many caregivers rely on their children for financial and family support, either from paid work or through caring for their siblings and undertaking domestic chores. These responsibilities, placed on children at such a young age, and a lack of awareness among families about the importance of education, means that many children are denied the opportunity to go to school.

For those children who are able attend school, their education has been significantly disrupted in recent years. The devastating Ebola crisis of 2015 and the recent coronavirus pandemic both resulted in the widespread closure of schools, causing significant gaps in children's learning for many months.

In the country's capital, Freetown, street children represent a disproportionate number of those who are not in school. They can often be found desperately trying to make a living through informal and unregulated work, from working on building sites to washing dishes in restaurants, unloading cargo from small boats, and sifting through vast mounds of rubbish and waste on the city's dumpsites in search of materials to resell. In the worst cases, they can end up involved in commercial sexual exploitation.

Following in-depth research into the issues faced by street children in Sierra Leone, in 2019 Toybox began working with an experienced local organisation, St George Foundation Sierra Leone, to deliver an education project based in Freetown. This project focuses on tackling street children's access to education as, for a street child, access to education is key not only to combating poverty and social exclusion, but also to supporting them on the first steps of their journey away from the streets.

A year on

As well as supporting children to enrol and stay in school, the project also works with parents and caregivers to raise awareness on the importance of sending their children to school and the benefits of education. Financial considerations are often the main reason why a child cannot go to school, so the project is championing the creation of community led savings groups. The aim of these groups is so that caregivers can pool their resources to ensure that collectively they have the financial means to send their children to school. Group members can also use these savings to set up

small business ventures and can draw on their savings if they or their children become ill and need to access medical support quickly.

When the coronavirus pandemic hit, it was necessary for our partner to quickly adapt the way they worked. During the Spring of 2020, the team began delivering new activities centred around combatting misinformation about the virus and ensuring communities knew how to keep themselves safe. They distributed soap, water buckets, hand sanitiser and face masks to the street children, and for the children most at risk, they have been providing mental health support through telephone counselling.

Emily Malcolm, Toybox's Programme Manager for Africa reflects on her recent experience of working closely alongside St George Foundation Sierra Leone during the coronavirus pandemic:

"I have continued to work with the team remotely, receiving regular project updates and providing support and advice on new ways to adapt their approach in light of the pandemic. Usually I would travel out to visit the team, but with this option unavailable we made the most of digital channels and still managed to work together very successfully. During the year I ran an interactive online refresher training session on safeguarding with them and the team have developed a further action plan to strengthen this key area in their organisation.

The most challenging aspect for the project has been the school closures, yet throughout this period the team remained undeterred from their overall mission. In my opinion, the biggest achievement they made during this time was enrolling 100 children from new communities into school once they reopened. This meant they had to increase their engagement with these children on the streets during the period schools were closed.

In addition to this, of the 100 children that we supported last year to go to school, 98 went back to school once they reopened, with the others planning to undertake vocational training in catering. This high level of engagement in education is certainly encouraging, especially at this time when there has been disruption to schooling and increased financial pressure on families, often resulting in children needing to work more."



INTRODUCING FAITH

10-year old Faith lives with her aunt in a small dwelling made from corrugated iron in one of Freetown's congested slum settlements. It is an area that is particularly prone to flooding. Here, the lack of access to clean water and sanitation mean that the incidence of disease and epidemics are high. There are also high levels of crime within the community and Faith comments that she often feels unsafe when she "sees gang members moving around the area."

MEET ARUNA

Aruna has worked as a social worker for St George Foundation for over five years. A key part of his role involves visiting places like the city's rubbish dumps and markets where street children congregate and spend most of their time. At these places, he identifies street children who are out of school with a view to exploring their interest in becoming involved in project activities. "I build friendships with the children, giving them food and discuss activities that catch their interest."

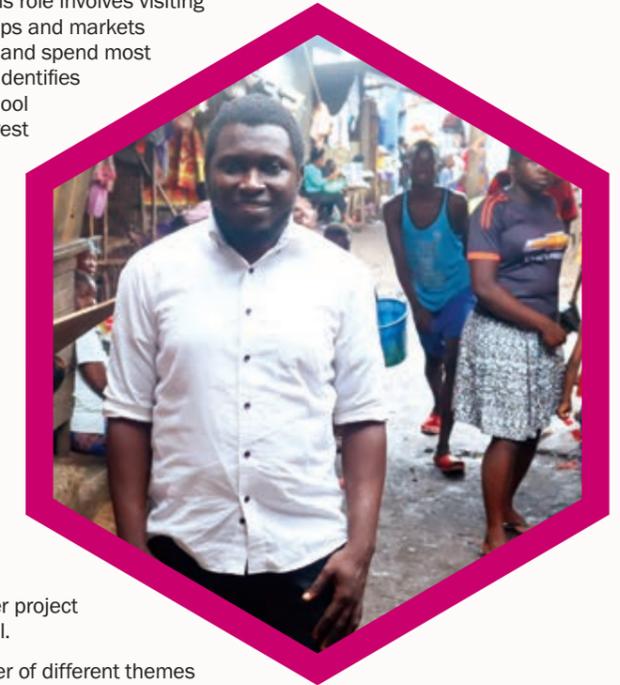
This outreach work is the foundation of the education project, providing the opportunity for Aruna and the team to begin the process of building trust with the children. This approach really works - and it ensures that the children feel safe, secure and understood from the outset. This in turn increases the likelihood of them taking that first positive step to register their interest in becoming further involved in other project activities and enrolling into school.

Outreach sessions cover a number of different themes such as learning about children's rights (and violations of those rights) and are focused on developing the children's life skills. They are delivered in engaging and innovative ways, including drama and sports. This element of the project requires significant commitment - it is labour intensive and the results are not always straightforward. Once Aruna has made initial contact with a child, he explains that his biggest challenge is physically locating them again, "The children move from community to community, based on the activities that interest them so finding them is challenging. It requires a lot of time and patience."

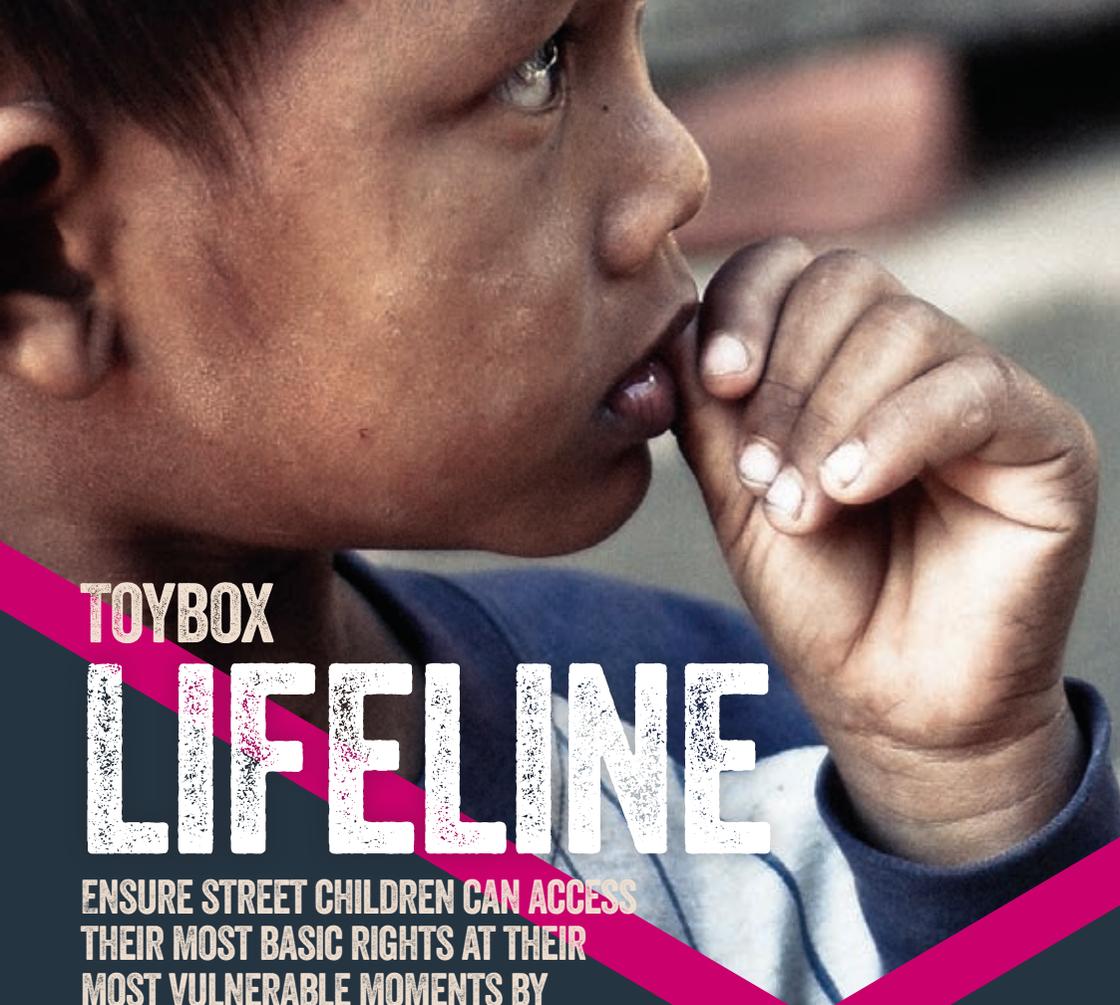
Despite the challenges he encounters within his work, Aruna says he has enormous passion for the job and has a clear vision for the future, "My hopes are to see the government of Sierra Leone and other child protection partners develop a strategy that will help street children access their basic rights."

When asked about his greatest achievement Aruna answered, "Helping children to make a choice in terms of behaviour change and living a life of positive value. Once one of the children was totally out of school and living in marketplaces. This project has changed his behaviour. Since his enrolment at school, he has been committed to his schooling activities. His teacher confirmed this during our visit to the school. He is now one of the child ambassadors who raises awareness amongst their peers through community and radio outreach activities."

Inevitably, the coronavirus pandemic has had an impact on the way Aruna and the team are able to undertake outreach work. As a result of the government restrictions in Freetown, it has been necessary to change the team's working hours to fit within the citywide evening curfews imposed. In addition, Aruna says that more recently he has been unable to make as many follow up visits to the communities in person as he normally would, so contact has been maintained through regular phone calls with the children. He explains how the situation for the children he works alongside has changed, "Their situation became very bad as a result of the outbreak. Many of them became stranded without food. This is very common during major lockdowns. Their chances of going to the market areas to find money and food became limited."



- Over half the population in Sierra Leone live on less than \$1.25 per day
- From the late 1980s internal conflict crippled the country and culminated in a brutal civil war, lasting 11 years
- A headcount in 2012 highlighted that the country was home to nearly 50,000 street children- this figure is now expected to be much higher
- In March 2020 the country overturned a five-year law which had forbidden pregnant girls from going to school.



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Alternatively, feel free to give Jenny a call on **01908 360080** to learn more.
Together we can change the world for street children.



Registered charity number 1084243

*All children's names have been changed to protect their identities
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