



# **Experience of Child Drivers of the Blind: Cases Observed on the Streets of the City of Kisangani in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors attest to compliance with the criteria of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) regarding their contribution to the article. All authors contributed to the conduct of this research and the writing of the manuscript. They have all read and approved the final version.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Child drivers of the blind are the concern of many pioneers in social paediatrics. These children live a life dependent on the blind. Less publicised and more difficult to count in official reports, the exploitation of children by their parents is a real scourge in Africa. Begging on the streets for the

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benefit of adults involves major risks for the hygiene and health of minors - sometimes newborns - and keeps them further away from school. This is a situation that should worry the political and administrative authorities. This work proposes to determine the experiences child drivers of the blind in the city of Kisangani with a view to promoting the right of the child. To collect the data, this qualitative study used unstructured interviews with a casual sample of six child drivers of the blind available and accessible. We found that child drivers of the blind are forced to beg for their livelihoods. Their schooling and the satisfaction of their basic needs as well as those of their families depend on the income they find in begging. Thus, the need to put into perspective the living conditions of child drivers of the blind in order to determine the most appropriate responses to their socio-economic conditions.

*Keywords: Blind driver; begging; life experience; Kisangani; tshopo.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are many children who, all day long, walk the streets accompanying blind or crippled adults to beg. These children are with these beggars every day and cannot go to school (Baraka, 2021).

In Belgium, begging with a child is not punishable in itself. What is punishable is the incitement to beg and the exploitation of begging. Moreover, the law does not distinguish whether the person who brings the minor to beg is the parent or not. Thus, a parent who encourages his or her child to actively beg or who makes the child available to a third party to beg could be prosecuted [1].

In Austria, there are no country-wide regulations concerning begging. Passive begging is therefore not illegal, but each federal province is allowed to regulate begging geographically or according to the type of begging. In addition, cities and municipalities also have this competence. Therefore, in some provinces, aggressive, organised begging or begging with children under the age of 14 is prohibited [1].

In Germany, too, it is the local authorities that decide where begging is prohibited or restricted. In Munich, for example, passive begging is allowed but intrusive, aggressive or organised begging is prohibited [2].

Less publicised and more difficult to count in official reports, the exploitation of children by their parents is a real scourge in Africa. Begging in the streets for the benefit of adults entails major risks for the hygiene and health of minors, sometimes newborns, and keeps them further away from school [3].

Senegal has a legal framework to protect children but also to criminalise the abusive practices of some Koranic masters towards children. Law No. 2005-06 on the fight against trafficking in persons and related practices and the Senegalese Penal Code explicitly criminalise forced begging by children [4].

In the Congolese magazine Harari in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), it is reported that dozens of children are enslaved by their own parents in the city of Goma. Some parents format the brains of their children from the age of three, making them beg to feed the whole family. Not bringing money home is a dereliction of duty and exposes the child to expulsion from the family home [5].

Worryingly, the fate of these children is linked to that of the disabled adults they accompany who are at the end of their lives. Deprived of their childhood, without schooling, many of their rights are violated ; as we know from article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child concerning the right to education and article 31 concerning the right to rest and leisure [6].

This study set out to determine the experiences of child drivers of the blind in the city of Kisangani with a view to promoting the right of the child.

Specifically, it aimed to :

- Define the relationship between these children and the adults they drive
- Discuss the reasons why they drive these blind people
- Explore the difficulties that children face in guiding the blind
- Identify their perception of the future

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in the streets of the commune of Makiso, city of Kisangani, Tshopo province in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In order to understand the experiences of blind child drivers, we conducted a qualitative descriptive research of the phenomenological type. This study focused on six children who drive blind people in the Makiso commune.

From the central themes, information was collected on the basis of 4 sub-themes, namely :

- The relationship of the children to the adults they drive
- The reasons why they drive these blind people
- The difficulties they encounter
- Future prospects for these children.

To maintain the relationship of trust, we preferred the personal interview technique, which is more conducive to confidentiality, the interview guide and the dictaphone as an instrument for collecting and storing data.

Each interview was read several times in order to get a feel for the participant's thoughts and the general idea of each interview (intuitive reading). Then we proceeded to open coding. Each verbatim was read several times and cut up according to the different ideas mentioned, and then parts of the text sharing the same content were taken out of context and associated with a code.

The analysis of the data collected was done in a systematic way, to identify the motivations of the children surveyed on the phenomenon studied,

to understand the daily life of the guides of people living with disabilities.

From the four main themes above, we were able to identify the sub-themes, then the categories, supported by the verbatim.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Identification

The first part of each interview was used to collect information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the children at the time of the survey: age, sex, level of education and commune of residence.

The sex ratio is 2 boys to 1 girl with an estimated average age of 13 years.

### 3.2 Development of the study's Sub-themes

#### 3.2.1 Children's relationship to the adults they drive

In the majority of cases, there were multiple relationships ; grandparents, uncles, parent and one participant was not related to the blind person.

E1: "... my grandfather is blind; but this one I'm driving is not my brother, nor is he a relative of mine. We only met here in town and he had asked me to start guiding him..."

E2: "the one I am driving here is my grandfather .....

E3: "I drive my uncle.... .... These children have grown up and they are ashamed to drive it".

E4: "she is my mother ..... I am her only daughter "

**Table 1. Distribution by socio-demographic categories of children who guide the blind in Kisangani**

Identification elements	Code	Age (year)	Sex	Level of education	Residence
Respondent 1	E1	15	M	2nd secondary	Mangobo
Respondent 2	E2	9	F	4th primary	Mangobo
Respondent 3	E3	15	M	4th secondary	Mangobo
Respondent 4	E4	12	F	6th primary	Mangobo
Respondent 5	E5	13	M	2nd secondary	Mangobo
Respondent 6	E6	15	M	2nd secondary	Lubunga

However, E1 had no connection with the person he was driving.

E1: "he's a father from the neighbourhood..... he asked me and we expected each other".

### 3.2.2 Working conditions

#### a) Duration

These children who guide the blind have totalled an average of 3 years.

E1: "I started guiding him in 2019".

E2: "I started guiding him when I was in third primary ..... and now I am in second primary year".

E3: "I started guiding him when I was in fifth primary... and now I am in fourth secondary"

E4: "I was in fourth primary when I started guiding it"

E5: "I started guiding him when I was in primary four"

E6 is on its second person, the first for a year and the second a year and six months ago.

E6: "he is the second person to guide.... I had started guiding the blind when I was in second grade.....the first one I guided was our tenant and it was after that I started to drive with the one we are with now...I drove about two years ago".

#### b) Consent

Some children guide the blind spontaneously while others obeyed their parents' order.

E6: "it was dad who asked me to drive the first one; but, for this one, it was myself who pushed me to drive it".

E2 : "... it was my mother who asked me to drive my grandfather...".

E1 was asked by a third person and his grandfather allowed him to drive the blind man.

E1: "It was someone who asked me to start driving it, guiding it. It was my grandfather who told me; take it and start driving it... "

E3 and E4 individually took the initiative to guide his grandmother.

E3: "I took the decision myself to guide her; because that's where my expenses come

from. And besides, I felt uncomfortable when I saw the other children guiding her and at the end they were sharing the money, so I decided to start doing it myself to avoid sharing the money with the commissioners".

E4 : "I myself had the desire to guide my grandmother".

E5 : " he was asked by the blind man to do him a favour, but with the agreement of his mother".

E5 : "... it was he who asked me to start guiding him. He asked my mother and she agreed that I could guide him every time...".

#### c) Reasons for leading the blind

##### - Poverty

The children have undertaken to provide for their daily needs on the one hand and to meet the family needs on the other.

E1: "... what pushed me to drive this dad was so that I could have a bit of money to help me and him survive...".

E4: "...we go around with grandma begging for food... "

E6: "... it's the fact that I've failed to guide him, in case of crisis. Because by doing this, we sometimes have a little bit to help us survive and also to pay our school fees. Apart from this job, I don't have any other job... "

E2: "...I drive him around the city to get food...".

E3: "...it's for my food ration, to meet my needs and pay my school fees...".

E5: "...we go around with dad to look for ways to find money, to look for ways to live...".

##### - How to find food

Some children get food when they are out and about.

E1: "...often we go around first and then we go to the restaurant and that's where we usually eat. And if there is food at home, before coming, we eat first, but if not, we come without eating...".

E5: "...we often eat when we come here. I take it as a job, because it rewards..."

On the other hand, others are content with their previous day's output, so they eat before going down to the field.

E4: "... before coming here with my grandmother, we eat first at home...".

E2: "...before we go out, we eat first and then we go around the city..." E3: "...before we go out, we eat first and then we go around the city...".

E3: "... before coming here in town, we eat at home first...".

For E6, eating before or while driving is a function of the availability of means to get food.

E6: "... when food is available, we eat before coming; but if not, we eat here in town before going home...".

d) Socio-economic problems encountered by these children

- Return

The donation is optional. Some give without problems and others ask us to wait and in the end they don't give anything.

E1: "... if we come to beg, some don't give us and others insult us...".

E4: "... we go around to the money changers, to the bank, to people with vehicles, to shops and boutiques; they give us nothing...".

E2: "... people are different; some give us and others do not...".

e) Attitude of benefactors

Lack of consideration for people with disabilities in society, especially the blind.

E3: "... for those who help us, it depends on whether they want to help us or not. We don't argue with them, we get along with them. But, we meet with a lot of difficulties ; sometimes when you ask someone, they call you names or use harsh and insulting words ; it confuses and discourages us, but looking at my studies and survival, it will always push us to come back..."

E4: "... the only difficulties we face is contempt and abusive words, sexual harassment, some chase us away, those who don't have a good heart, others answer meanly saying that he is a big daddy, instead of begging, he should go and sell water. At the others, they make us hang around without giving us anything until we get tired...".

E6: "... there are many difficulties. Often we are insulted, denigrated, despised instead of just being told that there is nothing. Others hit us. Some simply give us and others angrily...".

### 3.2.3 Means of travel

Depending on the means and distance, some children walk to the destination.

E4: "... we often walk to the city and it's the return journey that we go back on a motorbike taxi. We often start around 8 or 9 am and finish at 6 pm...".

On the other hand, those who live at a distance from the city centre take motorbike taxis.

E2: "... when we come, we take the motorbike taxi. We don't walk...".

E3: "... we leave the Mangobo commune and we often come by motorbike taxi. Another difficulty is related to road traffic, facing traffic accidents...".

### 3.2.4 Relationship with other drivers

Male drivers show their superiority over female drivers when sharing loot.

E5: "...some male guides provoke us a lot. There are times when we are given the money so that we can share, but they run away with all the money without sharing... "

In the majority of cases, the relationship between the drivers is good, they live in close collaboration.

E1: "... between us guides, we get along, we have no enmity between us...".

E4: "... with the other Guides we don't argue, we have a good relationship with them... "

E2: "... with other guides we never argued, or never fought. We are really good with them..."

E3 found that the relationship with other drivers is a function of education and temperament.

E3: "...some people love each other or get along and some people fight. Personally, I don't argue with other guides, even if they provoke me, I don't argue with them. Many of them had not studied, and when they provoke me, I just observe them..."

### 3.2.5 Income management

For E1, after work, my blind grandfather wants to share equally with his driver.

E1: "...often it is grandpa who keeps the money. But, it is at the veranda level of the finance and trade company that we share the money before going home. Per day, we can reach 30,000 Congolese francs and we share it equally...".

Furthermore, sharing is optional for some couples ; but often the bulk of it goes to the blind.

E4: "... my grandmother keeps the money. If we have, for example, 20,000 Congolese francs, she can give me 5,000 Congolese francs...".

E6: "... I often keep the money. After we have finished circulating, before going home in the evening, we count what we have got and I give her her share. If, for example, we had 30,000 Congolese francs, I give him 20,000 Congolese francs and I take 10,000 Congolese francs. If we had 15,000 Congolese francs, I take 5,000 Congolese francs and he takes 10,000 Congolese francs...".

E2: "... the income we find, it is the grandfather who keeps it and he also gives me a part. He often gives me 2 000 Congolese francs or 3 000 Congolese francs...".

The income from their work is used to provide for their family's basic needs.

E3: "... because it's my mother and it all comes from this money we get, we don't share the money. I don't demand it either, but if I am absent or prevented and someone else is guiding it, then they share the income...".

E5: "...it's daddy who keeps the money we get. At the end of the work, he gives me a part, often even 5 000 Congolese francs. Last time, it helped me with my school fees. But as the studies are free, it helps us to buy food, clothes or to meet some of our needs...".

### 3.2.6 Children's views on their future

#### a) Desire to complete studies

The children wish to continue their studies.

E1: "... my wish is that I can finish my studies in order to help my family...".

E4: "... I expect to finish my studies, the work I do (masonry), that I will continue...".

E6: "...my wish is to study and finish my studies, to be a teacher...".

E2: "... I still want to study... .. anyway, my desire is to give up and go on studying".

#### b) Working

In addition, some of them want to work.

E1: "... I will do the work that God gives me. I'm still in secondary 1, I'm waiting until I reach the third year to choose the option I'm going to follow...".

E3: "...anyway, I study so that one day, if God helps me and I graduate, I will be a teacher. I put all my efforts to study ...".

E6 does not only have guiding as a job.

E6: "... Apart from this work of guiding the blind, I also do masonry; if we are called to a building site, I go there...".

#### c) Getting out of guiding the blind

Some really want to give up guiding people with disabilities to do other things.

E1: "... my desire is not to continue walking with him, there will be the day when I will give that up...".

E6: "... to leave guiding the blind is my dream. As soon as I find the certificate of the masonry, I directly get out of this work of leading the blind...".

E2: "... anyway, my desire is to give up and go on with my studies. Besides, as it's almost the start of the school year, I'm planning to leave for good...".

E3: "...my concern is that I should be engaged somewhere, either in a school or somewhere where I'm going to work, and to let my mother guide me so that I can now take on her responsibility...".

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Identification

Out of six child guides for the blind, four are male and two are female, with ages ranging from 9 to 12 years for two respondents and 13 to 15 years for the other four. Four of them are in secondary school and two in primary school.

In his study, Alain Tchombè found that Africa is the continent with the highest number of working

children in the world. According to figures from the International Labour Organisation, 41% of children under the age of 15 are economically active.

By this description, we think that children are a strong weapon that parents use to attract the attention of passers-by to get something out of them. The peculiarity of children is that they sometimes voluntarily put on sad looks, rags and a pleading voice to gain the sympathy of passers-by (Baraka, 2021).

## 4.2 Development of the Sub-themes of the Study

In most cases, kinship has a great influence on this conduct of the blind. Some are praised and are not related to the people they drive. For others, it is really the relatives they drive.

For Beernaert (2011), begging with a child is not punishable per se in Belgium. What is punishable is the incitement to beg and the exploitation of begging. Moreover, the law does not distinguish whether the person who delivers the minor to beg is the parent or not. Thus, a parent who incites his or her child to actively beg or who makes the child available to a third party to beg could be prosecuted.

Testimony from the the non-governmental organisation Enda-Océan Indien, collected by Marguerat (2003), highlighted that young children beg for their parents in Madagascar [7].

In view of these results, we believe that child drivers of the blind feel obliged to do so because of their economic situation. They therefore accept to do it to provide for their basic needs.

As for the duration, this varies. Some started at a young age and others started at primary school and continue. Others do it according to their availability, either during the school holidays. Looking at the length of time the child has been driving the blind, it appears from our interviews that children who drive people with disabilities have been doing so for an average of 3 years.

In the Habari DRC press review [5], it was reported that dozens of children are enslaved by their own parents in the city of Goma. Some parents format the brains of their children from the age of 3, charging them with begging to feed the whole family.

Given the age of our subjects, we think that at a certain age, they will no longer be active in this profession of driver. This is why they do it in most cases during their childhood and once they reach adulthood, they stop to continue with their studies or find another more profitable activity.

As for consent, most children are recommended by their parents to accept driving blind. Others do so by their own consent without being pushed. However, Ballet & al [7], found 58 children coerced by their parents into begging.

The testimony of a Nigerian mother shows us that many street children end up unemployed in their adulthood. Referring to the talibé children of Koranic schools, she says : "My child was entrusted to a marabout by my husband at the age of 7. He was forced to beg, which prevented him from devoting any time to his Koranic studies. Now he is thirty years old and has no job.

Regarding the motivation to drive people with disabilities, it should be stressed that children are supposed to stay at home or at school. It is the duty of parents to feed their children and never the other way around. Two categories emerge from this sub-theme that motivated children to drive people with disabilities, namely poverty and hunger.

In this regard, Ballet & al [7] have argued that child labour is mainly in developing countries, and suggest that poverty is the main explanation.

However, most children do this work in order to provide for their basic needs. Other children are involved in this system of begging to guide their blind parents, with the precarious living conditions as testified by the words of Khady, a 15-year-old Senegalese : "..... I have to help my father by begging for food. I would like to go to school like the other children, but we are poor. I can't play or make friends. Because I have to be the guide and eyes of my father who is blind....." [8].

Ultimately, these children's involvement is motivated by a need for money or a family bond that unites them with these disabled adults. In any case, as children, they are not legally responsible for their actions. As such, Ballet & al [7] have stated that begging would generally be associated with cases of children who have run away from home, whereas research on child labour generally assumes that children work for

the household to which they belong. Therefore, when asked "Why do you beg ?", 42 said they beg for food and actually keep money for this purpose.

While the only purpose of begging by child drivers of the blind is to provide for themselves and those they drive, some parents may force their children to beg to feed their families.

Regarding the difficulties encountered during the exercise of their function, child drivers of the blind are confronted with several difficulties : contempt, insults, sexual harassment, discouragement, long waiting times without results, etc. Being psychologically disturbed by the personality they least expected, they are forced to rub shoulders with shops, shops, cars, passers-by in order to try to survive ; and all this, against their will.

Child drivers of people with disabilities are often faced with the problem of how to get to and from work.

Generally, child drivers of the blind come to beg in the commune Makiso in the city of Kisangani. They often do not do this in their own neighbourhoods. Instead, they look for places where there are attractive activities such as shops, currency dealers, large galleries and the like.

Our results are in line with those of Ballet & al [7]. The latter observed that children do not beg in their neighbourhood of residence, but move to other neighbourhoods deemed more conducive to earnings. Nevertheless, the movement of children from one neighbourhood to another is quite limited and the vast majority of children do not beg in areas more than 20 minutes' walk from their accommodation.

Tensions and arguments between drivers were also observed. Male drivers show superiority over female drivers when sharing loot. In the majority of cases, the relationship between the drivers is good and they live in close cooperation.

Ballet & al [7] recognised that children tend to group together to beg. Belonging to a group allows exchanges and relationships with other children. It is also a means of protection or reassurance against the dangers of the street (including assaults and theft by adults or adolescents). However, more

than a third of children systematically beg in isolation.

The management of loot is a function of the convention, depending on the children solicited and the family relationship. This is why sharing is equitable with some.

Some of the children interviewed felt that the sharing is optional, as sometimes the bulk of it goes to the person living with a disability. However, the income from their work is used to meet their living and family needs.

For Ballet & al [7], given that the sums collected per day are overwhelmingly less than 500 ariary (0.18 euro), the money is only for food. None of the children reported using the money for other expenses when they do not give it to their parents.

However, the many other repercussions of this are worth mentioning : risk of accidents, illness, violence, exploitation. In addition, as this task requires very high levels of effort (no less than ten hours of work per day), such an activity completely prevents them from going to school, thus hindering their future prospects [8-18].

Regarding the views of children for their future, all education programmes protect children and require every child to attend school to protect their future. Every child has a right to education. Contrary to what we found in the field. Even though our respondents have a strong desire to study and many plans in their heads, they do not know how to achieve this.

Our results show that these child drivers of the blind are dying to study and complete their studies in order to be self-sufficient. They see it as a temporary job, but with the desire to leave it and do another job. In fact, one of them wanted to have a good job to take care of his blind mother. Their real concern is to get out of this job of leading the blind into begging and to have a normal and better life.

Several studies have not yet provided any real answers regarding the future of these child drivers of the blind. However, some authors wonder about the future of child beggars. Ballet & al [7] ask : "Do children who remain under parental control and continue to beg also become adult beggars, so that a real career of begging is built up over time ?

Conversely, do those who emancipate themselves from their homes because they are rejected by the family manage to develop other activities that allow them to build up a certain economic autonomy ?

It appears that neglected children could leave the family home to live entirely on the street, with begging becoming one activity among others in this case, and not the main one.

In this respect, the testimony of a Nigerian mother shows us that many of these street children end up unemployed in their adult life. Referring to the talibé children of Koranic schools.

A study done by the Association Nigérienne pour le Traitement de la Délinquance et la Prévention du Crime [4] showed that, in most cases, the talibés leave school between the ages of 16 and 20 and have no general education or special skills. Their professional options are therefore very limited. According to the religious leaders interviewed, only 10% of the talibé become Koranic masters in their turn, while the vast majority end up unemployed and on the streets, often with no real knowledge of the Koran. Moreover, a large proportion of these boys will never see their parents or their home village again. Forced begging therefore greatly hinders the future prospects of the talibés.

In view of these findings, we believe that begging with children would have an impact on the latter's prospects. As begging is lucrative, they will grow up with this idea to the detriment of other activities and the path to school.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In view of our findings, we believe that the begging demanded by the blind from these children influences the latter's perspective. In any case, as children, they are not legally responsible for their actions. They are a sacrificial generation with a mixed future. These children deserve better than what the present offers. What is appalling is that the state and society look on and remain silent in the face of this drama that is unfolding before our eyes.

Thus, the need to recommend the following :

- To put into perspective the living conditions of the child drivers of blind people in order to be able to determine the most

appropriate responses to their socio-economic conditions

- Deploy strategies to extract these children from this environment and institute a system of direct benefits for vulnerable families, with awareness-raising and support programmes based on basic health care, school entry, food aid, psychological assistance, etc.
- To reflect at all levels on a coordinated social response to begging that truly addresses its causes, namely poverty and exclusion.

## CONSENT

As per international standard, parental written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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