

Street Children and the Managing of the City Centre in Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo)

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In the last two decades the emergence of “youth” in Sub-Saharan Africa has been a main concern in the international humanitarian agenda as well as in the academic debate. Despite this strong interest in childhood and youth, in recent years in Lubumbashi (Katanga, Democratic Republic of Congo) the number of street children has constantly increased.

Thus the local government of Lubumbashi has decided to launch a wide operation in order to gather all the street children and put them far away from the city, into a new “educational” centre. Contrary to the main objective pursued, a social and economic reinsertion of the street children in society, this operation has suddenly become an “anti-street children” campaign called “shegue zero” (shegue means a “street child”).

Based on this study-case, I would like to focus on these main issues:

- Why street children have suddenly become the main concern for the municipality of Lubumbashi? How does “shegue zero” (as other similar actions aiming to obtain property and order in the city centre) participate in creating an image of Lubumbashi as a “European city”? Why does this image associate the whole city only with its downtown? How do policies for managing African cities inspired by western countries’ model accentuate structural inequalities and affect the lives of weaker social categories?
- Street children reacted to the operation “shegue zero” by using creative strategies in order to resist the identification and control over them. They protested violently, they demanded work to the Governor, moved to other cities, changed their “look” to not be recognizable as street children and tried to disappear by living in abandoned “houses” in small groups in the cités of Lubumbashi. In what way may we understand these reactions? Are they forms of reappropriation of the public space? Perhaps a contestation against the failure of the local State? How do these children and youth thus influence and shape the local policy of managing the city?

This paper will be based on data collected during my first fieldwork in DRC (05/05 04/09/2010). It is part of my wider and onward Phd research on “youth” in Lubumbashi focusing on “marginal” phenomena as street children and children accused of witchcraft.