

April 2011

# LIFE Project in Georgia

Helping children living and working  
on the streets

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*A higher standard.  
A higher purpose.*



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## LIFE PROJECT IN GEORGIA

World Vision is grateful for your support in recent years of the Georgia LIFE project, as it responded to the needs of at-risk children in western Georgia. A final survey of youth participants revealed drastic improvements in school attendance and a decline in working or being on the street, and we've also seen positive developments in interactions between children and their parents. As the project comes to an end, we'd like to express our immense appreciation for the vital role you've played in making these transformations possible.

### Project summary

As you know from your involvement with World Vision and personal visit to Georgia, the LIFE project (formerly known as Laboratories of Learning) was created to raise awareness and understanding of issues affecting children living and working on the streets and then to design and implement activities to integrate those children back into their families and society.

The Georgia LIFE project began in October 2007 and ended in December 2010. During the first year of the project, an assessment was conducted in partnership with Johns Hopkins and Tulane universities, with the results influencing the project's design. The first intervention activities were launched in March 2009 in the western Georgian cities of Kutaisi and Batumi.

The project reached approximately 200 children who were living and working on the streets of those two cities. Activities focused on three areas: economic empowerment, improvement of psychosocial status, and improvement of access to formal and informal education opportunities.

By the project's end, World Vision celebrated the following accomplishments:

- Children were provided with informal education opportunities.
- A system was created to monitor school attendance, resulting in increased attendance and improved grades.
- Parent clubs were established in both cities to address problems faced by children and families.
- Vocational education and employment counseling were provided to children and their families, along with opportunities to receive loans, grants, donated goods, and referrals to various local government and nongovernment services.
- Several children were prevented from being institutionalized, and some children left institutions to return to their families.

### Project achievements and learnings by outcomes

*Outcome 1: Children and their families are empowered economically to support themselves and to meet their basic needs.*

- The number of families sending children to work decreased by more than 20 percent, based on surveys taken at the beginning and end of the project.



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Children were asked to place dots within certain environments (school, family, neighborhood, church, etc.) to represent where they saw themselves before and after their involvement with the LIFE project.

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### Story of change: Aleko

LIFE mobile team members found 16-year-old Aleko and his three sisters begging at a local supermarket. They were uncooperative and distrusting of the LIFE staff members. None of them were literate. Their parents had never thought about giving their children an education except on how to beg and survive on the street.

After a month of persistent visits from the LIFE workers, the youth began to trust them. The siblings were brought to the LIFE Batumi center, where they were enrolled in literacy and basic numeracy classes, in partnership with Youth Center, a state-run school. This was the first time the youth began to consider the importance of an education. For the first time, Aleko's 9-year-old sister, Elene, held colored pencils and markers in her hands.

Today, the three are involved in nearly all the LIFE activities and are hopeful about their future. They consider the LIFE staff members to be their best friends, always ready to help them in need. Because people believe in them, they have learned to believe in themselves and their potential.

- Two mobile teams, trained to build rapport with children and conduct surveys, connected with 214 children—194 of whom got involved in services through the LIFE project. The teams also conducted interviews with 165 street children to gather data for Johns Hopkins University.
- 113 people were referred to employment counselors by social workers and mobile teams. Of that number, 87 people were employed and/or received training opportunities with the possibility of future employment.
- Employment has proven to be a difficult component of the LIFE project because of some participants' low level of ambition and willingness to improve their work skills and become employed. Some of them also had difficulty coping with the work environment and lacked basic social and psychological skills. Trainings were conducted to raise the participants' motivation to be employed, to present local job opportunities, and address work ethics, resume writing, and interviewing skills.
- Credo, a World Vision-affiliated microfinance institution, issued eight loans (averaging \$700 each) and 26 small grants to LIFE participants. Employment counselors helped the recipients develop business plans and followed up on the loan issuance and business implementation processes. LIFE distributed two fewer microloans than expected because fewer business plans were submitted than expected. The grants component, however, was successful, with 16 more grants (of less than \$500 each) being distributed than expected. This enabled recipients to start small businesses and improve their economic status.
- As many as 160 people accessed existing social services run by the state or other nongovernmental organizations. Services included: health insurance for the poor; free medical operations; assistance with basic household items; and free testing for HIV, AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases. People previously didn't access these services because they lacked proper documentation and knowledge about what was available, and they also faced bureaucratic obstacles that required assistance from a social worker. The number of people benefiting from social services exceeded our expectations by 33 percent, due to the efforts of the project's social workers to inform beneficiaries about available services.

### ***Outcome 2: The psychosocial status of children living and working in the streets is improved.***

- A psychologist in Kutaisi assessed 43 children and identified main problems such as: hyperactivity and attention deficit, high levels of personal anxiety, high risk of depression, mental retardation, and challenges with age-appropriate development. The psychologist recommended continuing to work with these children to place them in an environment where they will receive support and advice from adults whom they respect and perceive as influential.
- Five of the children who were assessed were diagnosed with mental retardation and are under medical supervision to confirm the diagnosis. Once confirmed, the children will be referred to daycare centers.

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Nino, 15, was one of the most active members of the LIFE project in Kutaisi. Prior to her involvement in LIFE, she and her siblings scoured the streets for scrap metal to sell to support their eight-member family. Through the LIFE project, Nino was encouraged to pursue her interests in embroidery and acting, and she also returned to school.

- A psychologist in Batumi has been working with 50 children since December 2009. Twenty-nine of them have been regularly attending consultations and art therapy sessions.
- The most frequent problems among children and their parents are aggression and anger, based on the observation of the psychologist in Batumi. The psychologist met with children and parents to address these issues, and also worked to improve their living conditions. The parents learned about various approaches to discipline children, including positive reinforcement, listening, and caring. Children learned to control and cope with their anger, and continue to work on establishing more positive habits. As a result, the situation of five families drastically improved, and relationships became more stable.
- 169 people participated in psychosocial services, such as individual and group psychological consultations and psychosocial rehabilitation services provided by partner nongovernmental organizations. The LIFE project recruited psychologists in December 2009 based on the need for more comprehensive psychosocial support than the existing resources. A combination of psychological consultations, collaboration with religious groups, and art and sports activities helped to restore and maintain the psychosocial health of the majority of LIFE participants.
- Project social workers focused much of their attention on reintegrating children with their families, since a healthy family environment strongly influences a child's psychological and emotional health. Children deprived of parental care were referred to alternative services, including small group homes and daycare centers. However, these services are scarce and seldom available for street children. Thanks to the advocacy efforts of the project social workers, 28 children received community-based care.
- 66 parents participated in training sessions on issues such as domestic violence, HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, childcare, child and human rights, juvenile justice, and existing social services. The topics were chosen by the parents or LIFE staff, based on current needs. Guest speakers were invited from partnering nongovernmental organizations, local government offices, and medical institutions.
- 200 children participated in recreational activities, including out-of-town trips and visits to museums and the theater. The activities positively impacted the children's psychosocial well-being and helped with team building and communication skills. Children of different ethnicities, previously at odds with one another, developed friendships. Visiting various places also helped the children to broaden their horizons and appreciate their surroundings.

### ***Outcome 3: Children living and working in the streets have improved access to formal and informal education opportunities.***

- Thanks to an effective partnership among LIFE staff, Georgia's Ministry of Education and Science, public school administration, parents, and children, 63 boys and girls improved their school attendance. In

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### Story of change: George

George's problems began when his father was diagnosed with schizophrenia. His mother, Irma, found herself helpless, without training or a job, and with increasing financial needs. George soon was taken to a state-run orphanage, where his mother also had been raised. George ran away and began begging on the street, which is where LIFE's research interviewers found him. Mobile team workers and a social worker began working with George.

The LIFE staff found an agency that helped George and his family repair their dilapidated house. A social worker helped the family access a state program for the prevention of child abandonment, and the family currently receives \$55 a month, along with food assistance. George has gotten involved in the LIFE project's karate group, life-skills training (learning about HIV and AIDS prevention, personal hygiene, and juvenile justice issues), and meetings with a local church representative.

LIFE also gave Irma a microloan from a partnering microcredit organization. Irma was the first LIFE beneficiary to receive a loan, and she has started a small business buying and selling clothes. She currently is successfully managing her business and is proud to be able to provide for her family.

in addition, 17 children were enrolled in school for the first time as of December 2010. The project social workers advocated for the enrollment or re-registering (in the cases of truant students) of children into the school system. Mobile team workers regularly monitored the children's attendance, and the school administration and teachers were receptive of the LIFE project's involvement with the school.

- All project beneficiaries were involved in informal education opportunities through project offices, as well as through trainings organized and offered for free by other nongovernmental organizations and universities.
- Access to formal education for children increased. One example is among Moldavian children, whose families usually don't emphasize education. However, in Batumi, the LIFE project enrolled a large number of Moldavian children into the formal school system and engaged their parents in the process. LIFE staff members prepared documents for the children, tutored them in basic skills to prepare them for enrollment, worked with the education system to identify ways to include them in the schooling process, and also explained to parents the importance of education. As a result, the parents got involved and were supportive of their children's education and became positive examples to other parents.
- 145 children participated in life-skills training on topics such as personal hygiene, first aid, communications, team building, leadership, ethical behavior, HIV and AIDS prevention, trafficking and exploitation, children's rights, and basic entrepreneurial skills to start a small business. The first aid training included issues pertinent to street children, such as hypothermia, alcohol intoxication, or drug overdose. The information is presented to young children in the form of short comic books, ensuring they understand the materials regardless of their reading level.

### *Accomplishments in public relations and advocacy*

- Printed materials raising awareness about the LIFE project were produced and distributed, including 800 booklets and 4,500 copies each of three newsletters. More than five articles were published (in print and electronically), and local and national television stations covered LIFE events. Two public service announcements were broadcast on local and national stations, and also were posted on local buses. At least two street campaigns addressing children's rights were organized each year as part of a broader advocacy and public awareness campaign. A project website was not developed, because the budget was allocated to publishing 4,500 copies of a LIFE newsletter to be inserted into a local newspaper. The number of individuals reached through these various media methods can't be tracked, but we estimate that more than 50,000 people were impacted.
- In November 2010, the Parliament's Human Rights Committee conducted a presentation on issues affecting street children. As a result, a street children working group, which included a representative from World Vision, was formed within the parliamentary committee. Georgia's Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs approached World Vision and suggested we assist the government in creating social services

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*For more than 100 children who live and work on the streets of Kutaisi, fairytales seldom happen, but their recent involvement in a theater performance gave them the chance to perform a fairytale and, at the same time, discover their talents and creativity.*

for street children. Regular coordination meetings and networking opportunities have increased the visibility of children's issues among different stakeholders and society.

- In addition to social services support provided on a case-by-case basis, steps have been made toward lasting partnerships. For example, the Kutaisi Mayor House Youth Department absorbed the LIFE football team and drama group under its budget. As a result, children who formerly played for the LIFE Kutaisi football team moved to a state-funded football team, free of charge. Children in the LIFE drama group moved to a similar group at Kutaisi State University.
- Advocating for street children's issues requires a longer span of time than the duration of the LIFE project allows. However, many positive steps were taken toward addressing their issues, including increasing the visibility of their needs and building a network of local and national stakeholders. These achievements can only be sustained beyond the LIFE project if the relationships are maintained. LIFE will share the necessary expertise and lessons learned with any interested parties.

### Overall lessons learned

Each year of the LIFE project, LIFE staff members and other World Vision program partners conducted a workshop to reflect on the project's previous year and to discuss any necessary adjustments. As a result of these discussions, the project's activities and objectives were slightly modified, and new strategies were created to improve the project. Changes included the following:

- Enhancing the public relations component (such as distributing a project newsletter)
- Implementing additional activities to build the skills of local stakeholders (such as members of local street children working groups)
- Creating business clubs to encourage and develop entrepreneurship among beneficiaries
- Issuing small grants to parents and caregivers to start small businesses
- Recruiting psychologists to assist beneficiaries with severe psychosocial disorders

A final project evaluation was held in November and December 2010 and revealed an overall successful project. The following are lists of observations and lessons learned regarding replication of the project, continuation or extension of the project, impact, and sustainability.

#### For project replication

- Comprehensive research on the issues of street children, prior to designing and implementing the project, proved to be useful. The research informed our ability to design a holistic and complex project that was well-tailored for the target group. However, half of the total project length was spent on research and didn't leave enough time to work with the target group. Numerous key players and beneficiaries said that a year and half is not

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### Story of change: Valeri

At age 4, Valeri watched his father kill his mother. While his father was imprisoned, Valeri's grandmother raised Valeri and his sister and continued to care for her grandchildren until she died. The children returned to their father, who drank a lot and paid little attention to Valeri and his sister. As a result, Valeri spent most of his time on the street, collecting scrap metal and stealing.

Since joining the LIFE project, Valeri has become a member of the football team and is involved in nearly all the project activities. He has re-enrolled in school, and his attendance has been monitored by a social worker involved in Valeri's individual case management. Valeri has been regularly attending class and recently passed his ninth-grade exams. The social worker also helped Valeri's family benefit from a monthly food assistance program.

Recently, Valeri was detained by the police and asked to provide evidence about a local crime that he did not commit. His social worker advocated for Valeri's release and ordered a medical examination by LIFE's partner organization, Georgian Center for Psychosocial and Medical Rehabilitation of Torture Victims (GCRT)\*, which showed that Valeri had been beaten. A lawyer from GCRT is representing Valeri, and he also is receiving psychosocial support.

\* GCRT services individuals tortured by or in state institutions or during an armed conflict. GCRT also provides medical and psychosocial support.

enough to achieve the goal and outcomes, while also ensuring sustainability of the project. Hiring a local research institute would increase efficiency and savings in time and finances.

- A significant portion of the budget was spent on developing, testing, and piloting the baseline assessment tool, as well as assessing the psychosocial conditions of the target group. However, because the baseline tool wasn't appropriately contextualized, and the timing of it didn't consider the unpredictability of street children, the tool wasn't adequately used and, ultimately, was not cost-effective. (Examples of the tool's failures: The psychosocial assessment demonstrated there were no needs among the target group, but reality showed that some children needed psychological and psychiatric support. The baseline tool failed to detect these needs. Also, project staff members in the field said they didn't have an opportunity to participate in the design and improvement of the baseline tool or in the selection process of research institution partners.)
- Collaboration among the field, partner universities, and World Vision's support office during the design process proved to be time-consuming. Although the collaboration was well-planned, it didn't significantly impact the planning, implementation, or monitoring of the project, especially in light of the costs spent. Communication over email often required too much time because of the need to coordinate the schedules of multiple partners. Documents from the United States often were delayed and created challenges in the project's implementation schedule.
- Although the project staff engaged in advocacy with local nongovernmental organizations and also raised awareness of street children's issues at government levels, advocacy was not incorporated into the project design as much as it could have been. The project staff mentioned this during a reflection meeting and saw more intentional advocacy as a key to making their efforts sustainable.
- Cooperation with the public defender's office in Batumi was successful, with many beneficiaries referred to the project through a children's rights center. Government social workers in both cities also were cooperative. Although their limited resources didn't allow them to focus on street children, they gladly referred children to the LIFE project.
- The lack of qualified social workers on the mobile teams—addressed by additional training—was particularly limiting at the beginning of the project. Ideally, one or more social workers would be included on the mobile teams.
- Although World Vision typically does not provide psychologists' services, this type of service should be available when working with a challenging social group such as street children. A psychologist would collaborate with a field team to help them and the beneficiaries identify problems and develop possible solutions.
- Considering the nature of the street children, a certain level of flexibility is necessary throughout the project. When working on a pilot level, it is important to have the freedom to modify the baseline tool if necessary so that the baseline information best meets the project's needs.

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The LIFE project gave two sheep to this woman and her family to use as a source of income. World Vision sought to not only help children, but also help empower parents to provide for their families.

*“These children have gone through a spiritual transformation. They have learned about God, about love, about faith. But this is a long process. Children need support, and we cannot stop now.”*

*— Father Thoma, Kutaisi*

- The duration of the project is insufficient for us to achieve sustainable results and make a lasting impact. A significant investment of time is needed, once expertise on an issue is established, to build and implement a comprehensive advocacy plan.

### For continuation or extension of the project

- The project can continue working with the available human resources—thanks to the training of the field staff—without significant management support from additional World Vision offices.
- If the budget is reduced, redesign of the project is necessary. In particular, the project would focus on a target group for whom the impact would be most sustainable. In both cities, this would mean working with children who spend their days on the street, but have a family or caregiver and a home to return to at night. Continuation of interventions such as parents’ groups, while continuing our advocacy efforts among government partners, also is important. Our work with the government would include advocating for the inclusion of street children on the national child welfare agenda.

### For impact and sustainability

- The goal of the LIFE project was to see children living and working on the streets become integrated into family and society, and we believe the goal has been achieved. However, despite the achievements of the LIFE project, much more remains to be done to sustain the results—especially with the involvement of government and nongovernmental organizations—and influence lasting transformation in the way street children are perceived, assisted, and integrated in Georgia.
- The most effective results were achieved with children who had family or caregivers who partnered with the LIFE project. In these cases, children were reinstated in schools, documentation (such as birth certificates and national identification documents) was organized, children and their families were referred to relevant social agencies, and children received government health insurance and were included on government social assistance lists. Children started returning home more often; developed life skills; improved their hygiene and sanitation habits; and developed a sense of caring, friendship, love, and respect for their peers, parents, family members, and community.
- The project resulted in cooperation with schools and police. In Batumi, we witnessed stronger cooperation with schools, where the project staff and teachers worked closely to monitor children’s attendance and help them improve their grades. In Kutaisi, close collaboration with police was even more vital than in Batumi, since there was a larger number of children in conflict with the law. Probation officers and LIFE project staff worked to ensure the children were involved in positive after-school activities (such as drama, sports, or arts), were employed (depending on the individual’s age), or received vocational and skills training.
- Interviews with beneficiaries recorded improvements that the children had gained during the project. All the participants had moving stories of life changes, and they connected the improvements with the project and their

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### Story of change: David

When the LIFE project mobile team workers found 14-year-old David in the streets of Kutaisi, he was living an exceptionally dangerous life. His father had died when David was only 5, and his mother could barely support four children on her own. They often were hungry and didn't have enough money for basic necessities. David rarely attended school and earned money by collecting scrap metal. He often got high from sniffing glue or drinking liquid gas from a lighter.

Mobile team workers invited David to the LIFE Kutaisi center, where he was counseled about his harmful behavior and the importance of a healthy lifestyle. Since getting involved in LIFE, David has been trying to fight his bad habits. He's involved in life-skills training, the football team, trips to museums and theaters, and the drama group.

To help David's family, a social worker referred David's sister to LIFE employment services. She'll be given vocational training with a tailoring company, with the likelihood of being hired after her training. The family also is receiving monthly food assistance.

involvement with extracurricular activities, trainings, and interactions with caring people. Many of them mentioned changes that have occurred in their relationships with families, teachers, and peers, and how they've made many friends since joining the project. Several of them also mentioned the importance of learning about faith and attending church. A priest who regularly meets with children in Kutaisi said the transformation in the beneficiaries has been colossal, and that the impact of the LIFE project on the children's lives has been immense. He said this is only the beginning for most children, and the time spent working with them—while successful—is insufficient to tell if the changes will be lasting.

- Most of the interviewees made a point to mention that they don't have an alternative to the LIFE project office (as a place to get assistance) and would like to see continuation of the project or a replacement.
- Opportunities should be pursued to sustain the existing partnerships and level of engagement with the government, with the goal of handing established services for street children to relevant ministries (such as health, social care, etc.). This would establish World Vision as a leader in working with street children in Georgia and a key player in this area with sound research and practice-based expertise.
- One of the most significant successes of the project was a working group on issues facing street children and its involvement with government stakeholders. As a result, this vulnerable population is on the radar of the parliamentary committee on child welfare. Through the efforts of the working group and the activities implemented by the LIFE project, the government has been convinced that there is a need to help street children. The government also has been made aware of existing models to follow to successfully integrate children into society so that they'll have opportunities for a decent life, education, employment, and future.
- Overall, the project has made a strong impact on the government level, but services for street children and advocacy for their needs must continue in order for impact to be maximized in the field and on policy levels.

## Stories of change

In December, LIFE project staff met with children to learn about how the project impacted their lives. The questions that the project staff sought to answer, along with some of the children's responses, are listed below:

### How did you get involved in the project?

- "I was living on Kirov Street, and Sopo (a mobile team worker) met me." (Ucha, 13)
- "I used to be with my brother and my cousin, and we had been in the orphanage and in the street." (Tako, 11)

### What is the most significant change that you can tell us about since you got involved with the project?

- "I got involved with the acting group. I had always wanted to be an actor. Now I can really do it." (Ucha, 13)

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- “Our parents care about us. We have a little brother and when he was born, World Vision gave us some pigs and chickens. Our dad has a job fixing cars and we’re learning also. We go to school—we didn’t go before. Our mom bakes cakes, and she got credit to have a business.” (Levan, 16, and Archil, 13)
- “I used to feel like some claws were holding me in ... now I feel free. I used to be shy and now I have friends. I have changed; my life has changed.” (Irma, 16)
- “My mom was so happy when we got the gifts from the project. Now she is making something from sunflower seeds and she has income. I decided to become an actor since I joined the project. I used to work and spend time in the street 24 hours. Now I go to school. I bring my friends here, too. It’s great. A lot has changed in my life.” (Bezhan, 16)

### Why is this story/change important for you?

- “I want to have a family and take care of them. I also tell other children about how my life has changed. I will never step away from this path ever.” (Oleg, 17)
- “It’s the best thing for a girl to live with her mom. Everyone should live with their mom.” (Tako, 11)

### How, if at all, has the work of the mobile team and other World Vision staff contributed to this?

- “They have been in touch with my parents and helping me with tutoring.” (Karai, 13)
- “Some kids will go back to the street if this is not here. ... I will never forget the time spent here and will always keep these friends.” (Irma, 16)



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Youth who participated in the LIFE project talked about the positive friendships that were a result of their involvement in the project.

## With deep appreciation

The children who participated in the LIFE project are merely at the beginning of their journeys toward transformation. Without a doubt, your support of the LIFE project has made a significant, life-changing impact on hundreds of children and parents in Georgia. Children and youth are now empowered with skills and education that allow them to dream about a brighter future, and their parents are more aware of how they can support their children.

In addition, the methods used for assessment and pre-design research have been and will continue to be replicated throughout the region in other projects addressing child protection. Also, the data gathered at the start of the LIFE project enabled us to determine the effectiveness of the interventions, rather than simply assume they worked well. This analysis will inform the designs of future projects helping children living and working on the streets in Georgia and throughout the region.

Much work remains for vulnerable Georgian children, but this project has given World Vision and our local partners a strong foundation to continue reaching out to them. Thank you for your partnership.



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