

Africa's Children: The Struggle for a Decent Life

Children the world over make the same wishes: the wish for enough food to eat, a place to learn and play, and a safe and peaceful home. For Africa's children, the fulfillment of these wishes is in doubt. Africa is a continent of the young. Half of its nearly one billion people are under the age of 25 and more than half these are girls and young women. The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child affirmed the child's right to adequate food, health, and medical care. Yet as this paper demonstrates, millions of African children are denied their rights.

Despite efforts by the international community to help children in Africa, figures show that alarming numbers of children are still suffering from preventable diseases and poverty. This can be traced to the ongoing problems of inadequate pre-natal care, malnutrition, unpotable water, HIV/AIDS, Africa's debt, lack of education, and child labor. While these painful conditions dramatically affect children health, they also impact education and economic development. Organizations like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Program, World Vision, Childreach and Youthpeace have programs in Africa working to guarantee that children can be developed to the full extent of their

humanity within their own models of defending the child's rights.

Major Obstacles Facing Africa's Children:

Inadequate Pre-Natal Care

Between 800 and 1,800 women die per 100,000 live births in central and west Africa from pregnancy and childbirth. Every woman in Mali must face the fact of a 1 in 24 chance of dying because of inadequate health care and complications related to child birth.

Malnutrition

In sub-Saharan Africa, which has the highest percentage of children dying before the age of 5, half of these deaths result from malnutrition; 175 million children under 5 suffer from malnutrition and 33,000 die from it every day. Health facilities in rural areas lack equipment and personnel to accommodate family and children's needs.

World Vision, a child-centered organization, cited food insecurity as a significant factor in malnutrition. Child-bearing women and small children are the most vulnerable to malnutrition. An estimated 192 million preschool children in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from protein or vitamin deficiencies. Without active changes



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Half of Africa's population—about 300 million—live without access to basic health care or a safe water source.

Eurodad

to this pattern, World Vision predicts that twice as many people will be undernourished by 2010.

Malnutrition manifests itself in a number of life-threatening ways. Although preventable, many children sicken from protein-energy malnutrition, vitamin A deficiency, low birth weight, anemia, iodine deficiency, diarrhea, and a horde of infectious childhood diseases.

UNICEF, which is mandated to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to meet their full potential, regards adequate nutrition, basic health services, and care for women and children as central to achieving its goals. UNICEF promotes breast feeding and supplemental foods, encouraging cognitive capabilities like language, and emotional support. Beyond its most immediate and obvious health damage, malnutrition also disrupts children's quality of life by impeding their activity, growth, learning capacity, and work performance. Malnutrition threatens a country's future. As UNICEF explains "it [malnutrition] slows down a country's social and economic development as it threatens the human potential represented by the children...it hampers progress."

Unpotable Water

Water-borne infections result from unsafe water sources and inadequate sanitation. Over half of sub-Saharan Africa's population suffers from these problems as they display themselves in sicknesses like diarrhea, giardia, and gracunculiasis which comes from the guinea worm.

HIV/AIDS

Although the more industrialized coun-

tries seem to be curbing their AIDS problems, sub-Saharan African countries face an exponential growth and spread of the virus and youth are hit the hardest. An October 28th, 1998 *New York Times* article revealed the disturbing information that "AIDS is cutting the life expectancy in many African countries and will effectively reduce their populations within the next 10–15 years." In a number of sub-Saharan countries, one in four people is infected with the virus. According to the *New York Times*, "In 1997 alone, the disease orphaned 1.7 million children, more than 90 percent of them in Africa South of the Sahara." In East Africa, 40 percent of children 15 years or younger have lost their mother or both parents. Of H.I.V.'s daily infections, half are contracted by people between the ages of 10 and 24 years old. The epidemic in Africa, however, is receiving little focus despite these alarming figures: "attention seems to have shifted from the disease, largely because it seems to have been contained in the industrialized nations," noted *The New York Times*. "Much of the industrialized West seems to have shelved efforts to aid afflicted developing nations."

Lack of Education

In central and west Africa, many schools lack quality education and sustain a low enrollment. Not even half the children of primary school age attend and the statistics are worse for girls. The number of girl enrollments in primary education rose from 51 in 1960 to 76 in 1990 for every 100 boy enrollments and 51 to 67 girl enrollments in secondary education.

The findings of research conducted into the education of girls shows that there

are obvious economic and social benefits for the society in terms of:

- a significant increase of the gross national product;
- increase life expectancy;
- generally improved nutrition and health for the whole family; and
- better opportunities for the emerging generation.

Child Labor/Economic Exploitation

Extreme poverty leads to the economic exploitation of children. The Union of International Associations cited the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* in their studies of exploitation of child labor. They determined that putting children in the labor force threatens their psychological and physical well being. The International Labor Organization estimates that two out of every five children in Africa under the age of fifteen are forced to work for their very survival, as against one out of five in Asia.

Africa's Debt

Africa's debt, which is over \$300 billion, and amounts to \$400 for every African, profoundly affects both the health and educational conditions of Africa's children. According to a Jubilee 2000/USA report, Sub-Saharan African countries spend more money servicing debt than on primary education and health care. In Mozambique where one in four children dies before the age of five, the government spends four times as much money on servicing their debt as on health care. In Ethiopia, for every dollar spent on health care, four are spent on servicing their debt. Meanwhile 100,000 children die each year in Ethiopia from diarrhea. Adabayo Adedeji of the African Center for Development Strategy in Nigeria likened the

crisis effects to combat: "debt is tearing down schools, clinics, and hospitals. The effects are no less devastating than war," he said. And with statistics that show that in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in twenty women die giving birth, 30% of the children are undernourished, and one out of two preschool deaths are caused by malnutrition, Adedeji's metaphor is not far from literal.

The Future

Despite these circumstances, young Africans from eighteen countries who spoke at the Economic Commission for Africa's 40th Anniversary Conference this spring, noted that progress has been made to create an enabling environment to achieve education and gender equity.

Making the wishes of Africa's children come true is a formidable task. Increasing opportunity for children demands the world's attention and your strategic actions.

Ways You Can Help:

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) advises non-profit organizations on how to support and collaborate with African NGOs.

UNICEF, Division of Communication, Three UN Plaza, New York, NY 10017

The U.S. Committee for UNICEF can provide speakers on the situation facing African children. Contact:

U.S. Committee for UNICEF, Public Information, 333 East 38th Street, New York, NY 10016 Tel: (212) 686-5522

Begin an initiative to bring youth in your community together with African youth. Contact Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), an organization focusing on housing and women's education in Africa. For project ideas contact: FAWE, International House, 12th Floor

In Mozambique one of four children dies before age five due to infectious disease, yet the government spends four times as much money "servicing its debt"—that is making payments on interest and principal—than it does on health care.
Financial Times

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*The New York Times has had several articles
on AIDS in Africa including on June 24, 1998,
September 18, 1998 and October 28, 1998.*

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are from various UNICEF publications.*

*UNICEF is mandated by the United Nations
General Assembly to advocate for the protec-
tion of children's rights, to help meet their ba-
sic needs and to expand their opportunities to
reach their full potential.*

*Founded in 1966 by The American Committee
on Africa, The Africa Fund works for a posi-
tive U.S. policy towards Africa and supports
African human rights, democracy, and devel-
opment.*