INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON STREET CHILDREN

AND STREET CHILDREN'S HEALTH IN EAST AFRICA.

TITLE OF PAPER: *THE PROBLEM OF STREET CHILDREN IN AFRICA: AN IGNORED TRAGEDY.*

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ABSTRACT:

The twenty-first century presents a hostile face to many millions of children in many African countries. An increasing number of children are being forced to the streets as result of poverty, abuse, torture, rape abandonment or orphaned by AIDS. Human rights violations against children in the 1990s have become a common and disturbing occurrence in many African countries. Indeed denial of basic human and legal rights including the right to life, liberty and security as a person to children are now a defining feature of the African socio-economic landscape.

This paper examines Africa's response to the growing problem of street children. Taking Tanzania as a case study the paper examines initiatives that have been and are being taken by various segments of the community to address the problem of street children. What kinds of policies and strategies are African governments putting in place, what is the family and community doing? For instance, to what extent are families, schools and individual members of society dealing with the problem? Indeed, how is the government dealing with the increasing numbers of unsupervised children living alone in urban streets? What role can Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations play in addressing the problem of street children?

We contend that not enough is being done to address the problem and that indeed the problem of street children remains an ignored tragedy that is set to have a devastating impact on the development of African counties. The paper indicates that the response to the problem has at best been muted and remains ignored or sidelined by the government and the general public. Key players who are supposed to play a leading role in finding a solution to the problem have become the major source of the problem. Government policies that embrace liberalization and the free market economy are contributory factors to the persistent state of poverty and increased hardship with children being affected most. The family, which is supposed to be the bedrock of children's welfare and protection, is today becoming a major cause of the problem of street children. Parents are sending their children into the streets to beg, steal or engage in petty trade, children are leaving their homes to escape domestic violence or because of the breaking up of family structures. Schools are turning into centers of violence and crime and creating an environment to puts more children on the streets.

We contend that government policies directed by structural adjustment programmes are responsible for putting more and more children on to the streets as a result of increasing poverty instead of devising policies that will ensure the welfare of children and the society in general. The general public pretends not to notice the plight of an increasing number of destitute children on our streets. There is at present no real alarm or outrage from the general public on the increasing number of children on our streets even though these children face starvation, are at the mercy of unscrupulous individuals and a brutal police force.

The government and the community in general need to put in place viable policies or strategies that will ensure that the plight of street children is urgently addressed. The paper contributes to this task by exploring means and ways that the government and the community at large can play in solving the problem of street children in Africa and Tanzania in particular.

Introduction:

Stroll through a market or past a hotel or at the roadside of any major street in the center of most African capitals, towns or urban areas and you cannot fail to see them. They are stopping cars and people to beg or to ask for work. You will see others shining shoes, selling sundry articles of uncertain origin, or hurrying to wash the windscreens of cars stopped at traffic signals. Yet others would be roaming around or gathered in small groups waiting for something to do.   Look at them closely -their faces show strain and sadness, their clothes are ragged and dirty, others appear hungry suffering from ill-health and malnutrition. There is something mature beyond their years in their haunted expressions. At night, you can see them huddled along street corners, in doorways, or in any dry and secluded corner. They are the representatives of a growing multitude of children who have become known as the "street children".

The problem of street children is a growing problem worldwide, more so in African countries. The presence of large numbers of children sometimes as young as three on the streets in urban areas was virtually unheard of prior to the transition to a market economy. It is now a growing problem in most African cities and towns. The problem requires urgent attention as it threatens the very fabric of society. A starting point would be to get an understanding of who these children are and the factors that turn them into street children.

The definition of street children adopted by this paper is that of children under the age of eighteen who spend most of their life on the streets. There are those who life permanently on the streets "children of the street" (Lugalla, 1995). These live and earn their 'living' on the streets. There are also those who earn their living on the street but do not necessarily live on the streets. These spend most of their time on the street but usually return to some form of a 'family' unit where there is some kind of supervision or control.

This group includes an increasing number of school children that spend most of the day on the streets. All these are considered as street children in this paper.

The problem of street children has been growing steadily in the last two decades. An estimated 10 million children in Africa live without families, mostly in towns as 'street children' (UNICEF, 1984:39). One main characteristic of the "children of the street" is that they live alone in streets, without proper or reliable shelter; they have lost contact with their parents and, as such, they do not enjoy parental protection, love and care (Lugalla, J & Mbwambo, J, 1995). Street children share the streets with millions of adults, many of whom regard them as nuisances, if not as dangerous mini-criminals. What most of these children actually do on the streets is, of course, work. Children who live and work on the streets often come from slums and squatter settlements, where poverty and precarious family situations are common, where schools are overcrowded and poor, and where safe places to play simply do not exist. Yet other children come from middle class or well to do families who run away from their homes. The number of street children has increased in places experiencing armed conflict, like Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Monrovia (Liberia), where parents or caretakers have been killed, the economy disrupted and family and community ties severed. Poverty is also forcing an increasing number of street children on the streets. In some instance it is parents or guardians who send the children to work on the streets to support their families and others are forced on the streets to find food and shelter which is not forthcoming from their families.

Street children face untold hardship and danger on the streets. The lack of food, clean water and adequate health care. Living and 'working' on the streets exacts a terrible toll on street children. They are often prey to every physical and moral danger and as they grow older they often become a danger to others. After such precarious childhoods, most of them are condemned to spend their lives excluded from mainstream society.

The Problem of Street Children in Africa: Why are Children on the Streets?

UNICEF (1985) correctly observes that Yesterday, street children were no more than a footnote. Today, street children are a major issue. Tomorrow, if present trends continue, they could be a blight on urban civilization.   For Africa, tomorrow is already here. Street children are not only a blight on urban civilization; they pose a serious obstacle to overall socio-economic development in Africa.

The world and Africa in particular are witnessing rapid and wide ranging socio-economic and political changes. There is rapid urbanization, run away population growth and increasing disparities in wealth. The introduction of structural adjustment programmes and globalization are changing the very fabric of African society. One of the negative consequences of the se changes is the emergence of large numbers of children on the streets.   In Tanzania they are known as 'watoto wa mitaani', in Kenya they are known as 'chokorra' and in The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) they are called moineaux or 'sparrows'. By whatever name they are called, what stands out is the sad fact that every where, children living and working on the street are ignored, scorned, mistreated and misunderstood by society and by governments.

 "People don't love us," says Tigiste, a 12-years-old girl, who sells roasted barley and begs for change at stoplights in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa (UNICEF, 1985). The observation made by this young girl illustrates the attitude of most of us. Society tends to view these children as troublemakers, a nuisance or menace that needs to be taken of the streets. Few stop to ponder on the reasons why these children are on the streets, where it is apparent they are not enjoying themselves.

Identifying reasons for the existence of street children is crucial in finding a permanent solution to the problem. There are those who argue that the emergence of street children is bound up with the totality of urban problems - that the phenomenon is exclusively urban: there are no "rural street children." While it is true that street children are usually found in urban areas, many of these children have rural origins. So the problem extends beyond urbanization. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is no single cause for street children. Some of the children have taken refuge in the city from natural or man-made disasters. Others are the offspring of prostitutes. Handicapped street children, rejected by their families, also constitute a distinct and relatively large category. A number have been disowned by a "respectable" parent unwilling to acknowledge the embarrassing outcome of an affair. In such cases, the children do not in variably come from the poorest families. In West Africa, fieldworkers have discovered street children from various background, including a son of a taxi-driver, a nephew of a dentist, even the grandson of a farmer minister.

In addition to the "pull" of the excitement and glamour of living in great cities and the hope of raising one's standard of living, there are also "push" factors that increase the migratory flow from the rural areas. In many rural areas, natural increase has pushed the population above the carrying capacity of the land. In parts of Rwanda, for example, where the average number of children per family is eight, the resulting subdivision of the land has made agriculture akin to gardening (UNICEF, 1986). Families are therefore forced to move to urban areas in search of employment and a way out of the poverty trap. Once in the cities, many families break up with children being forced into the streets. Clearly the increasing numbers of street children also indicate a constellation of other trends, such as cut-backs in government social and educational budgets, as well as the breakdown of traditional family and community structures, which leaves children unprotected. While all of the above are substantive factors contributing to the existence

of street children, increasing mass poverty stands out as a major factor for the existence of street children. It is poverty that is breaking up homes and families, it is poverty that makes grown ups turn children into sources of income or into articles for sale, It is poverty, particularly in rural areas that is making young children from their homes and it is poverty that is turning society into a vicious and uncaring society.

It is argued in this paper that street children in Africa are the victims of shortsighted policies, or lack of policies. They are victims of an uncaring community that is increasingly being characterized by poverty, breakdown of family life, violence and economic hardships.

Poverty and street children in Africa:

Poverty is a major cause of street children. Africa is today a continent characterized by extreme poverty. It is poverty that is resulting in children being forced to work on the streets to support themselves and their families. It is poverty that is also causing many families to break up with parents being unable to support their children. It is rural poverty that is making rural populations including children to move to urban areas with the hope of a better future. Poverty causes malnutrition and poor health and reduces a family's ability to work thus creating conditions for children to move to the streets.

More than half of the annual deaths in Tanzania and other Sub-Saharan African countries are caused by infections and parasitic diseases. In contract, these diseases cause only 5 per cent of the deaths in developed countries and about 20 per cent of the deaths in Latin America. Because most deaths from infections and parasitic diseases can be prevented through public health measures, immunization, and adequate health care, this heavy death tool in Tanzania is a testament to the depth and breadth of the country's poverty and the low level of economic development. The most affected are children. It can be argued that poverty is a major cause of street children.

Breakdown of the Family and the Emergence of Street Children:

The family institution in Africa is going through a lot of upheavals. Fewer and fewer children have stable and loving family environments. Many families have broken up with children left to fend for themselves. Many families are also increasingly characterized by absent parents, lack of communication between parents and children, alcoholism and domestic violence. Many children run away to the streets to avoid violence and abuse in the family. It is now common occurrence to hear of terrifying stories of abuse of children by parents or family members. Children as old as three are increasingly being sexually abused, starved and ignored by the family and community at large. It is today not surprising to see parents or guardians using force or threats to send their children out to beg, steal and work to earn income for the family. Adults are increasingly using children as sources of income and thus violating and denying children their basic rights as human beings.

Reduced income increases the pressure to put children to work to support the family. This means that children will have to terminate their educations. When these children grown up because they are uneducated, they are unable to find formal employment. Unemployed and without money, often petty thieves, alcoholics or drug user, they are unable to give their own children an education. Children without positive father figures to model themselves after later find it difficult to relate to their own offspring. Fathers devalued by enforced idleness, alcoholism and socially unacceptable activities cannot nature confident children.

The result is that of more and more children escaping to the streets as a safe heaven. Once on the streets these children beg, pilfer, grab and steal in the name of the family. New arrivals on the streets soon find that the streets are full of drugs and violence, a place of fear where the constant preoccupation is sheer survival.

For every child in the street, many more are at risk. Among the prime candidates are those from poor families, orphans and those escaping from rural life.

The social and economic forces, which push families with children into this downward spiral of marginalization, are depressingly self-sustaining and are transmitted from one generation to another.

African Governments Response to the Problem of Street Children:

Of all the agents capable of doing something about the problem of street children, the state is perhaps best situated to tackle the issue. However, part of the tragedy of street children is the way African governments have abandoned them to their fate.

With each passing day, it is becoming increasingly clear that many African governments of countries where the problem is most acute have been unable to give it the attention it deserves, and have unintentionally contributed to its continuation. While it is true that most governments have formulated child development policies, set up departments and sometimes ministries dealing with youths and some dealing with women and children, effective action to address the problem is yet to be taken.

While one can speak of some kind of political commitment on the part of many African governments, very little is being done to address the problem of street children. For instance, Tanzania's political commitment to children has been visible for some time now. Major benchmarks of this commitment include the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Others include holding of National Summits for children and establishment of Ministries responsible for children and women's affairs in

Mainland and Zanzibar. However, most of the direct actions to help street children are being undertaken by Non-Governmental organizations and religious organizations.

African governments appear incapacitated or slow to address the problem of street children. This in part stems from the fact that little is known about street children. Even with a Ministry for women and children, government departments often lack comprehensive and reliable data on street children. A study carried out by UNICEF in 1999 indicated that the literature on street children in Tanzania is relatively small and repetitive (UNICEF, 1999). It is therefore in our view very difficult if not impossible for effective government action without reliable and up-todate data. Data on street children is by itself not sufficient to find a lasting solution to the problem of street children. National Child Development Policies and strategies are a necessary requirement. Tanzania has been able to formulate and put in place a Child development Policy that was adopted by the government in 1996. This document is however very generalized and fails to identify street children as a special category requiring special attention. There is growing need for African countries to formulate and implement dynamic child development policies if we are serious to deal with the problem of street children.

Africa is ignoring the Problem of Street Children:
The traditional response to street children by most governments in Africa and elsewhere has been repression. Street children arrested for a minor theft or roaming around (uzururaji) are often held in custody until somebody can be found to take responsibility for them. This can take weeks or months. Detention in harsh circumstances is the common lot of street children every where. This tells us more about the real attitude of governments than any examination of national legislation.

Today governments are increasingly taking ruthless steps to clear the streets of street children and other unscrupulous characters. They do not offer any viable alternative to the street. Politicians, policy makers, and urban planners seem to be

helpless in their efforts to either resolve the problem of and assist street children, and have, to date, failed to prescribe plausible solutions which are realistic, down-to-earth, and concrete (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1995). It appears that governments pay lip-service to the idea of improving care for "street children," but they are influenced by the commonly held opinion that since street children will inevitably wind up as criminals, there is little use in spending public funds for their support. This view is similar to that of Lugalla (1985) who argues that street children are considered to be hooligans, vagabonds, and people prone to committing crimes. As a result of this, they have been a target of harassment by law enforcement organizations; there are many cases of street children being beaten by police, detained, and sometimes repatriated to their rural homes. The little that is being done by the government appears too little to make a difference to the plight of street children.

Too little to make a Difference:

Street children tend to fall between various jurisdictions with neither providing real assistance. The emergence of the problem of street children may itself point to gaps in coverage. Typically, each Ministry may have far more urgent problems on its hands than street children, and none will be prepared to take overall responsibility. Departments tend to determine and shape their programmes in accordance with the policies they are given. These policies are usually aimed at aiding families and are rarely flexible enough to cope with exceptions.

The Ministry of housing, for example, has nothing to offer street children. Moreover, relocating families into cigarette packet-sized apartments does not necessarily reduce the incidence of street children, as Western experience shows. From the standpoint of Ministries of Education, street children are dropouts lacking familial background necessary for them to benefit from education. For education bureaucrats, street children had better leave the field free for those who can benefit from education. Labour

ministries consider them un-trainable because they lack of ducation and are therefore unemployable. Youth and sport ministries see them as unruly spirits liable to damage precious equipment reserved for middle-class children. Health agencies are more useful because street children will not refuse first aid, as they will other offerings from well-intentioned adults. In addition, street children may themselves be a threat to public health.

All told, authorities do only the minimum for street children, and then only under pressure. This confirms the observation that too little is being done for street children and it appears that even the little being done

Community Response to the Problem of Street Children:

Like the government, the community also stands accused of failing to address the problem of street children. We as individuals and as a society have failed to live up to our responsibilities as parents and as custodians of the young. The community tends to hide its head in the sand hoping that the problem will go away. Unfortunately the problem is not going away, but increasing to alarming proportions.

Traditionally in an African society, a child was normally a member of a community and could not be separated from it. This meant that even the entitlement that a child deserves was a community matter.   Shorter (1974) observe that in traditional East African societies, the child was educated and socialized by the community for membership into the community. A child in Africa used to be the responsibility of each individual member of society and therefore children had no need to fend for themselves. They were loved and cared for by society. Today's children are the responsibility of individual parents and are ignored by the rest of the community.

While the number of street children grows by the day, the community remains silent with the exception of a few individuals and organizations. There is no community

outrage to the problem. We shake our heads and moan about 'watoto wa siku hizi!' (The children of today!) and go about our daily business.   The few soft hearted or religious ones will throw a few shillings to these miserable children and move on.

There appears to be no community pressure that is being applied to force government action to find a lasting solution to the problem of street children. The community has also failed to organize itself into a dynamic force to encounter the problem. This is perhaps the saddest and most tragic part of the tragedy that is unfolding in Africa. Children are our most valuable commodity yet we appear to have abandoned them to their fate.

What needs to be done?

A question that we must increasingly ask ourselves is how long must it take before the problem of street children attracts the proper attention that it deserves? How many more children must first take to the streets or die because of lack of care on our streets before we can acknowledge that the problem of street children is a very serious one which is likely to affect all of us? The probable answers, given present day conditions in Africa, is that the problem of street children has to grow to enormous proportions before it gets the attention it deserves! This is a tragedy that cannot remain ignored any longer. What are some of the actions that African countries can take to address the problem?

The first important step is to realize and acknowledge that the problem of street children is one of the most burning problems and challenge facing the African continent. There needs to be a firm commitment by all concerned parties to tackle the problem and not just ignore it hoping that it will go away or that other people are going to come to solve the problem for us.

Children living on the street, without homes or families, pose the greatest challenge in terms of rehabilitation, often needing long-term one-on-one counselling.

Preventive measures are, therefore, vital to protect children from the risk of full exposure to life on the street.

It is suggested that The Union Constitution should be amended to guarantee children's rights (Makaramba, 1999). There is no doubt that there is an urgent need for the Government to review the existing law and enact a specific Child Act to ensure the protection of child rights in Tanzania. This also goes for other African governments. Street children are indeed a special group of children needing special protection. The legal system must cater for the special interests of children. For instance, children should not be locked up in the same jail as grown up prisoners. The police force needs to trained to protect street children rather than being a force to harass and punish these street children who often find themselves on the streets for reasons not of their own making.

Education is also seen as a means of helping children on the streets. Most of the street children are illiterate with no basic skills to help them get proper jobs. Education may help break the vicious circle of marginalization and help potential street children towards a better life. This is not proving to be the case for many African countries. With liberalization and reforms schools seems to belong to a different world, remote from the everyday existence of those most deprived. School then becomes for street children only another possibility of failure. The number of dropouts is inevitably very high, and very few African countries have been able to give further attention to those who have failed to clear the first hurdle. Vocational training must be made accessible to street children as a means of getting them of the streets.

It is often pointed out that the content as well as the form of education is often questionable and unsuited to the needs of the poorest. It is still based on Western middle-class values, promotes a model of consumer society, and reflect the idea that only white-collar jobs are entirely proper. For those weeded out of school, there is no future.

When confronted with the years of wasted effort, frustrated youngsters tend to reject the entire system, and seek refuge among those already in the street. In Africa, where learning carries great prestige, drop-outs have been know to wash windscreens rather than face the shame of returning home to the village. So the issue is not only providing education and training, but also relevant education that will be able to help street children and other children as well meet their most basic needs. It must also be said that street children cannot be motivated to educate themselves while they remain hungry, homeless and in poor health. So education must be accompanied by adequate welfare for these children.

Strengthening the Family Unit:

Another way to lessen the incidence of children winding up on the streets is to strengthen the institution of the family. As the basic component of society, the family has hardly ever been given adequate recognition by governments. Paradoxically, it is only recently when it is most threatened, that its natural virtues are being rediscovered. Although many governments have developed policies aimed at assisting the elderly, the unemployed, or single working women, few have focused specifically on strengthening the cohesion of the family as a component of development strategy.

Policies centered on the family can counteract the unanticipated side-effects of development, often caused by unco-ordinated government policies. As a recent United Nations study on youth maladjustment put it: "If one conclusion has to be drawn from our data it would be this: juvenile delinquency is not the inevitable result of poverty and rapid urbanization. They intervening variable is the strength of adult-child relationships, most notably family relationships" (Doc. 22, UNSDRI, Rome, 1985). A sound policy for strengthening families would recognize the family as the basic unit for the human development and would seek to assist it to cope with change by allowing better access to services such as day-care and pre-school education.

But families cannot be strengthened in the midst of poverty, human degradation and destitution. Neither can families become pillars of strength in face of increasing injustice, inequality and income disparities. The problem of street children will become less pronounced if families and countries could overcome poverty. Justice and equitable distribution of resources is likely to have a positive impact on the problem of street children. At the level of the family, parents and guardians must take responsibility for their children by providing a conducive environment free of neglect, violence and abuse. The shameful exploitation of children by parents and their families can only lead to more children on our streets. Collaboration between parents, schools, the community and government will lead to viable solutions to the problem of street children.

The Role of Non- Governmental Organization (NGOs) in Addressing the Problem of Street Children:

In recent years, innovative work for street children has been almost the exclusive preserve of the private sector: In many of the worst affected countries, notably Brazil, NGO projects, executed mostly by religious groups and mostly all underfunded and overworked, have developed new ways to help street children. Their programmes are less expensive, more humane and more affective alternatives to institutionalization. Whether the political will exists to duplicate these innovative programmes is another matter. While NGOs are to be applauded in their efforts to address the problem of street children there is need to scrutinize the role of many of these NGOs and the extent to which they contribute to solving the problem of street children.

There is to date an increasing number of international and local based NGOs with the supposed aim of helping and protecting street children. Indeed the welfare of children and their rights is a fast growing industry attracting huge amount of money aimed to go towards improving the welfare of children in Africa. The reality is often one in which many of these NGOs do not advance the interests of children. Money is often diverted to other activities instead of addressing

the needs of children. For instance, many NGOs solicit and receive money to help street children or disabled children but end up using most of the money for administrative services. There is therefore need to clearly define the role of NGOs in addressing the problems of street children and the welfare of children in general. A code of conduct based on ethical considerations for children is necessary if NGOs are to assist in the advancement of children's welfare.

Finding Gainful Employment to Street Children:

In practical terms, there is a need to legitimize and further develop the concept of street education, which aims at restoring street children's confidence and rebuilding their contact with society. Opportunities for formal and non-formal education and apprenticeship training, such as those offered by Uganda's Africa Foundation and the Undugu Society of Kenya, offer hope for a better future.   Also, the affected communities must be sensitized to the plight of street children and galvanized for action to do something about the situation. Even the most poor, given relatively modest inputs of technical advice and finance, can successfully address this task. The goal is for the street children to learn that even if they do not have loving families able to give them the help and protection they need, they do have caring communities. In addition, ways must be found to restore the sense of cohesion and solidarity which previously existed in traditional societies.

Resources to help street children can be found in unsuspected corners of society. The elderly, who have leisure time, have great potential. Voluntary action by other age-groups such as youth movements can release well-springs of inspiration and care. Even the disadvantaged themselves can become protagonists of their own advancement. By surviving, street children show positive qualities which, directed towards positive goals, can break the tyranny of the peer group.

Many institutions, such s universities and technical institutes, represent great concentrations of financial and intellectual capital that are insufficiently concerned with the human problems on their own doorsteps. They should be enlisted in the struggle to help street children. These institutions can assist by collecting and analyzing data on street children. Reliable and comparable data on the extent and nature of the problem of street children are a key element in the effort to eliminate the problem, and effective solutions cannot be fashioned without such information.

Governments, Communities, NGOs and UN agencies must together create a system of data collection that will quantify the numbers of children living and working on the streets. In this context, the participatory learning and action techniques, involving community members in assessing and devising solutions to the problem of street children need to be developed in each individual country.

Most key initiative that need to taken can fall into one of five categories: promoting and enhancing the education alternative; building on national and international legislation and improving enforcement: empowering the poor; mobilizing all levels of society to combat the exploitative forms of child labour: and campaigning to persuade parents and other community members to show greater responsibility for their actions.

Any comprehensive attack on the problem of street children must therefore advance on several fronts. It must aim to : release children immediately from the most damaging situations, rehabilitate those children who are released from work through the provision of adequate services and facilities, especially education; and protect working children who cannot immediately be released, making their life as safe and as conducive to development as possible.

But the most important front of all is prevention: ensuring that new generations of children are not driven to the streets. There is a vast range of ideas about how to tackle

the unacceptable problem of street children. The problem is so huge and diverse that multiple strategies are needed.

Any comprehensive attack on the problem of street children also mobilize a wide range of protagonists: governments and local communities, NGOs and spiritual leaders, employers and trade unions, street children themselves and their families.

Some will be more motivated by protecting the children involved; others by erthancing the educational opportunities that provide a way out of the cycle of child labour and poverty; and still others by helping raise global awareness of this fundamental abuse of human rights. The important point is not that one particular strategy dominates but that maximum energy and attention are applied to the problem.

The voices of Street Children must be heard:

There is little likelihood of finding a lasting solution to the problem of street children without involving the street children themselves. Very often the tendency has been to formulate plans and strategies for children without consulting them. Families, the government and the community at large must seek out the street children and have a meaningful dialogue with them. We must speak and listen to the street children if we are to help them. We must find out more about their problems and prospects and how we can best help them. Living on the streets is difficult and hazardous and therefore anyone able to survive must be listened to and helped. It is without doubt that street children are resourceful and determined people who must be given a chance. The initial step must be hearing their voices and cries for help. On the other hand, the street children themselves must raise their voices to ensure that their plight is known. They must fight for their rights and we as a community must help.

Conclusion:

The task of helping street children seems Herculean. Clearly it cannot be achieved simply by injections of money, or by merely passing laws. Mere material improvement trickling down to the community level will not help either: All these efforts may even aggravate matters unless they are accompanied by programmes which will allow children to develop their potential and by a softening of punitive attitudes towards street children by authorities.

There is no longer any reason for governmental complacency. Children are Africa's future and Africa must invest In them in no uncertain terms. The presence in cities and other urban areas of large numbers of disgruntled young people can be politically destabilizing. They are prime targets for those prepared to use violence as a political weapon. Street youths-tough, ruthless, unattached, half-educated, intellectually vulnerable and familiar with secrecy, deception and the subversion of authority-can be perfect recruits. The street children and street youths of today can be the guerillas and terrorists of tomorrow. The problem can no longer be ignored.

What is clear is that if Africa is serious in its efforts to promote children welfare it must pay urgent attention to the plight of street children. There is at present no real alarm or outrage from the government or general public on the increasing number of children on our streets. These children face starvation, are at the mercy of unscrupulous individuals and a brutal police force and often die from preventable diseases.

It is argued here that the welfare of children, particularly street children cannot be advanced in a situation of declining human development. It is suggested that African governments introduce measures, which will offset the increasing excesses of the free market economy. The idea of a welfare state, which will oversee the protection of children and other vulnerable members of the society, cannot be sneezed upon. Indeed it is important to highlight that the pioneers and most capitalist of states have in

place strong measures which protect children and other vulnerable members of society. The tragedy of Africa is the introduction of crude and unhindered liberalization as a strategy of economic and social development. This trend must be reversed in the interests of our children and future generations.

We conclude by emphasizing the observation that It is inconceivable that the welfare of children can be advanced in an environment of increasing mass poverty, conflicts and wars. It is in this regard that efforts must be done to ensure sustainable development on the African continent.

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