

SOCIAL WELFARE POLICY AND THE PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

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Growing up in Africa has an opportunistic effect. The political and economic space can literally choke a child. Children become sometimes become victims to bad governance and ineffective administration. They are made to gaze in desperation, gasping for breath for better days. The challenging issue is that many parents are not aware of the rights and protection of their children. Many do not think this as something to be respected. Parents sometimes use the excuse of economic hardship to abuse children's rights and thus exposing them to myriads of dangers.

Who is a child? According to the United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), a child is someone below the age of 18 years. To start with, every child has basic right to education. Children's education is expected to develop each child's personality and talent to the fullest. This will encourage children to observe and respect other human rights. In addition, children have rights to quality health care, safe-drinking water, nutritious food, clean and safe environment, as well as information required to help them stay healthy in the environment.

Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence, hurt, and maltreatment physically or mentally. Rape, incest and all forms of sexual perversions are becoming usual headlines on daily basis. Most children in Nigeria are exposed to sexual abuse through hawking, unsupervised access to internet, television and programmes that are rated above their age. According to UNICEF, "underage marriage hinders human

progress by perpetuating deprivation, inequality and disadvantages across generation". This ignoble act is mostly done by deviant men who take advantage of girl-children and their poor parents.

Also, children have rights to air their opinion when adults are making decisions that affect them. They have rights to their views and this should be taken into account. Many children, however, are afraid of their parents and are therefore unable to discuss issues bothering them, especially on social injustices with their parents. On the other hand, some parents do not have time for their children and they often leave them to the care of housemaids. Although there is a long African

tradition for deference to one's parents and elders, it is important for African parents to respect the views of their children so as to prevent them from a misguided future.

It is time for every African to know that making education free for every African child is the foundation of a prosperous society and a sustainable future. Breaking off intergenerational poverty, violence and environmental degradation requires a future of healthy, well protected and well educated children. When children do not have the opportunity to transform their dreams into reality, they end up becoming thugs in the society. I agree with Rita Pierson's

statement that every child deserves a champion who will never give up on them, who understand the power of connection and insist that they become the best they can possibly be.

More so, every child has the right to parental care and state assistance. This is because when a child becomes a grown-up adult, the benefits accrue

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not only to the parents but the society at large. As the local saying goes "a cock is owned by a household, but it crows to the benefit of the community".

Parents in particular share the responsibility of bringing up their children and should always consider what is best for them. Government and parents should respect the appropriate responsibility of providing guidance to children. The success of the Africa-American doctor and politician, Ben Carson is an example of the potential of every child irrespective of social and economic background. Carson's success was orchestrated by his mother who shunned his inferiority complex and opened the gate of success for him. Today, Ben Carson has positively influenced many people around the world.

Let us now attempt a critical examination of the social welfare programmes in some African countries. The social welfare programme in South Africa popularly known as "Developmental Social Welfare" or "The White Paper" for social welfare has the major aim of reducing poverty through grants. However, some setbacks have greeted the programme. This include widespread belief that grant beneficiaries abuse the money, belief that social grants encourages teenage pregnancies and dependence on the state. It is often added that there has been inadequate monitoring and evaluation of the social development policies and without leaders able to champion the transformation, momentum was consequently lost in the implementation of developmental welfare services. Though other programmes such as Growth Empowerment and Redistribution Policy (GEAK) were later introduced, social welfare services and community development programmes in South Africa continue to lack adequate funding and social policy innovation. The situation is not quite different in Nigeria as lack of focus, concern and zeal by the government to plan, effectively, implement, monitor and constantly evaluate social services delivery has greatly hampered social programmes such as Youth Training Schemes, micro credit initiatives for women, the National Poverty Eradication and Empowerment

Programme (NAPEP), and food distribution programmes in primary schools.

It is of interest to note that the Social Welfare Services Department is charged with the responsibility of providing social services to needy families, children, the elderly and generally, to the vulnerable groups of the populace. In spite of this, Nigeria has more children suffering from malnutrition, deadly but curable and preventable diseases such as malaria and dysentery. From report, 110 out of 180 million Nigerians are still greatly poor and can hardly boast of three square meals daily. This is a miserable and very pitiable condition that spells disaster for the future of African children that are the most affected. It is, however, never too late to make amends. Hence all already existing social welfare programmes in African countries should be reinvigorated, well-funded, managed and monitored by competent hands. Egalitarianism should be the watchword in social services delivery. Capacity building should also be encouraged. In addition, there should be children rehabilitation centres in African countries.

What frameworks currently exist for the protection of the African child? Disturbed by the welfare and rights of children on 20th November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), while the OAU assembly of Heads of States and Governments adopted the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRCW) in July 1990. Article 4(1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a child provides that "in all actions concerning the child undertaken by any person or authority, the best interests of the child shall be primary consideration". This ideal remains unfulfilled in many African countries today. The interest of the child is not the primary consideration anymore. No wonder the African child is now being used as factory labour, school dropout, trafficking, street hawking, child marriage, rape cases, and harassment. The list is endless.

Something urgent must be done to save the acclaimed "Africa leaders of tomorrow" from this tragedy. The African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRCW) should be ratified, domesticated and effectively

implemented by all African countries and punishment should be meted out to noncomplying countries. Also the Human Rights Instruments and Institutions for Child Protection such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWA), and the National Human Rights Commission should be embraced by all African countries. This will help checkmate child abuse and as well guarantee the protection of the rights of the African child.

In conclusion, I speak for those children who cannot speak for themselves. Hope is not just enough to change the world of the African child, bring peace, end starvation, provide decent education, provide good health care and most importantly protect their rights. This is the critical starting point for building a brighter and better future for children. All hands must be on deck to

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transform these hopes into action and we would by this have created a map that will carve a new path to the future of the African child, and then we will be bold to give them a warm handshake and smile to them saying, "Welcome to Africa, a place of your dream".

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