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National population statistics beg an urgent question: Is Tanzania caring for its children?

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A dramatic increase in the youthful profile of Tanzania's population has been an emerging trend for years. The trend was confirmed in 2002 with alarming national statistics: a full 55% of Tanzania's population falls in the very narrow 0-19 age bracket, whereas 45% of the population spans the 20-80+ range.¹ In fact, as recently as 2005, it has been shown that a whopping 45.8% of Tanzania's population is actually under the age of 15.² Undeniably, the predominant youthfulness of Tanzania's population begs the question of its emerging issues in national development, and increasingly, it is acknowledged that the health, protection and education policies and services which exist (or fail to exist) for Tanzania's children indicate cause for concern.

In a recent report on Tanzania, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) explicitly notes that: health-care services and health insurance schemes are inaccessible to the poorest children and families; a high percentage of children under five are chronically malnourished and without access to medicine; there is insufficient attention to developmental, reproductive and mental health issues of adolescents; there is insufficient quality education at all levels and the physical environment of many schools is very poor; discrimination against certain groups of children (e.g. pregnant teenage girls) exists in legislation and in practice; there is no national plan of action linked to intersectoral policies and strategies for children; and, there are no juvenile justice standards at any correctional or judicial level.³

Perhaps not surprisingly then, Mkombozi, a leading child rights organisation in Tanzania, reported in its October 2006 census that the country's vulnerable children continue to migrate to Arusha and Moshi towns in search of employment because many consider the street to be a "road to self-determination and advancement".⁴ In a context of rapid urbanisation, youth unemployment and poverty, these youth are making practical choices to use the streets to climb out of lives of poverty and abuse. As such, the very existence of street youth demonstrates Tanzania's inadequate investment in education, protection, employment and recreation services for children in general and vulnerable children in particular.

Importantly, Tanzania's inadequate investment in the majority of its population is a problem that runs even deeper than the shortage of child-focussed policies and services. It is a problem which manifests in inappropriate practices such as police round-ups of street children that have been occurring since 2001.⁵ It is a problem which manifests in the involvement of more than 350,000 of Tanzania's children under the age of 15 in child labour, many employed at a "slave wage" under hazardous conditions in commercial agriculture or on mining and quarry sites.⁶ It is a problem which manifests in the continued widespread practices of female genital mutilation and marriage of teenage girls.⁷ The problem is that Tanzania's youth are suffering the effects of repressive attitudes and norms toward children in general. Child labour, for instance, largely escapes judicial scrutiny because it is shrouded in secrecy and because impoverished parents give consent for their children to be employed and to drop out of school.⁸ Similarly, the lawful use of corporal punishment in the home, in urban and rural schools and in the penal system is widely prevalent and supported - 85% of Tanzanian parents approve the use of corporal punishment in schools.⁹

Problematically, punitive attitudes toward children blend with secrecy and "taboo" to produce alarming situations of physical, verbal and sexual child abuse - situations like that uncovered by Mkombozi's research team in the Majengo community, occurring inside and outside the school environment, perpetrated by students, local workers and male parents.¹⁰ The fact is that child sexual abusers can take advantage of the stigma and embarrassment associated with disclosure which typically ensures secrecy and concealment by the child and his/her family.¹¹ It is also true that cases which are ultimately handed over to relevant authorities are often mishandled due to a lack of training among child protection professionals to detect, record and treat child abuse victims and due to a lack of provisions for justice for the child victim.¹² The UNCRC is particularly concerned that appropriate mechanisms for containing or preventing the abuse of children in Tanzania are insufficient and recommends systematic training for all professional groups working for and with children, especially law-enforcement officials, teachers (rural and urban) and social workers.¹³

In fact, the interplay of population demographics and national development will receive some important attention at Tanzania's upcoming "5th African Population Conference" to be held in Arusha in December 2007.¹⁴ Indeed, the quality of Tanzania's future depends on the willingness to acknowledge the effect of prevailing norms and attitudes upon the practical potential of forward-looking government policies such as MKUKUTA¹⁵ which aim to support vulnerable groups such as children and youth.

ENDNOTES:

- (1) www.nbs.go.tz/population.htm [National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) Tanzania]
- (2) nbs.go.tz/TZ_FIGURES/TZ_FIG_2005.pdf (NBS report: "Tanzania in Figures 2005")
- (3) Concluding Observations of the UNCRC, Tanzania (21 June 2006), UN Doc. CRC/C/TZA/CO/2.
- (4) www.mkombozi.org/publications/research_report/2007_05_research_report_census_2006.pdf ("Mkombozi Census 2006")
- (5) www.mkombozi.org/publications/position_paper/2005_position_paper_arusha_roundups.pdf ("Arusha Caucus for Children's Rights Position Paper")
- (6) www.anppcan.org/new/chapter%20profiles/tanzania.doc ("The situation of children's needs in Tanzania")
- (7) Concluding Observations of the UNCRC, Tanzania (21 June 2006), UN Doc. CRC/C/TZA/CO/2.
- (8) www.anppcan.org/new/chapter%20profiles/tanzania.doc ("The situation of children's needs in Tanzania")
- (9) www.endcorporalpunishment.org:80/pages/progress/reports/un-rep-tanzania.html ("Lawfulness of corporal punishment in Tanzania")
- (10) www.mkombozi.org/publications/action_alert/2006_06_16_action_alert_sexual_abuse.pdf ("Action Alert: Child sexual abuse in Tanzania's schools")
- (11) www.anppcan.org/new/chapter%20profiles/tanzania.doc ("The situation of children's needs in Tanzania")
- (12) www.mkombozi.org/publications/press_release/2006_08_23_press_release_sexual_abuse.pdf ("Culture and attitude play a key role in abuse")
- (13) Concluding Observations of the UNCRC, Tanzania (21 June 2006), UN Doc. CRC/C/TZA/CO/2.
- (14) www.tanzania.go.tz:80/5apc/
- (15) Tanzania's National Strategy for Growth and Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP / MKUKUTA, 2005)