

JUSTICE for CHILDREN

Edited version of a document prepared by Apolos Landa and Fiona Hahn for the SIM Justice Task Force, 29 April 2010

We often think the real challenges in life fall in the adult world. What about children? What does their reality look like? Well, first they have to survive.

(The following photos and statistics are from UNICEF's special report on the State of the World's Children.)



19 million
infants in developing countries are born with low birthweight.



8.8 million
children worldwide died before their fifth birthday in 2008.



4 million
newborns worldwide are dying in the first month of life.



4 million
under-fives die each year from just three causes: diarrhoea, malaria or pneumonia.



2 million
children under 15 worldwide are living with HIV.



>500,000
women die each year from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.

We rejoice when children survive a harsh infancy, but what does life look like for these survivors? For many, it means they will be sick, hungry, exploited, uneducated, and the bearers of the blunt injustices of disparities. Unfortunately, these things are always significantly worse for the girl child. For no reason other than that she is female, the girl child is less likely to have adequate nutrition, less likely to receive health care, less likely to go to school, more likely to be abused, and more likely to be exploited in the sex industry.

These are the crushing realities in the day to day lives of children:

Challenges of survival and development



2.5 billion
people still lack access to improved sanitation facilities.



1 billion
children are deprived of one or more services essential to survival and development.



148 million
under-fives in developing regions are underweight for their age.



101 million
children are not attending primary school, with more girls than boys missing out.



37 million
infants are not receiving iodized salt to protect them from iodine deficiency.



22 million
infants are not protected from diseases by routine immunization.

Challenges of disparities



Child mortality
among the poor is at least 1.9 times higher than among the rich in more than half of 90 countries with sufficient data to make an assessment.



Underweight prevalence
is more than twice as likely for under-fives who are poor than for those who are rich in developing countries.



Piped drinking-water connections
are more than twice as accessible for urban households than for rural ones.



Improved sanitation facilities
are almost twice as accessible for urban dwellers than for rural ones in developing countries.



HIV prevalence
among young women in Eastern and Southern Africa is 3 times higher than among young men.



Comprehensive knowledge of HIV
among young men in South Asia is twice the rate of young women.



Youth literacy
among young men is 1.2 times higher than among young women in the least developed countries.



Net secondary school attendance
in Latin America and the Caribbean for boys is 6 percentage points lower than for girls.



Child marriage
among young women living in rural areas of the developing world is twice that of young women from cities.



Birth registration
is almost twice as likely for children born in cities than those born in rural areas.



Attendance of skilled health personnel at delivery
for women from the richest income quintile in developing countries is 2 times higher than for the poorest developing countries.



Lifetime risk of maternal death
is 300 times greater for women living in the least developed countries than it is for those from industrialized countries.

Challenges of protection



500 million–1.5 billion
children have been affected by violence.



150 million
children 5–14 years old are engaged in child labour.



145 million
children have lost one or both parents due to all causes.



70 million
women and girls in 29 countries have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting.



> 64 million
women aged 20–24 in the developing world reported they were married before age 18.



51 million
children are unregistered at birth.



18 million
children are living with the effects of displacement.



15 million
children have lost one or both parents due to AIDS.



14 million
young women give birth between the ages of 15 and 19 years old.



1.2 million
children were trafficked each year as of the year 2000.



>1 million
children are detained through justice processes.

Additionally, over 40 million children are aborted globally each year (gutmacher.org).

“Because the world’s children are in no way to blame for what they have to endure, they represent a mirror to us of the evils the world tolerates, accepts, or excuses” (Myers, 100). Children are voiceless and powerless to change their situation. We must be their voice.

Biblical Basis for Concern for Injustices related to Children

While children are on the periphery in society, they are central in God's kingdom. Children are central in God's plan of restoration of all things:

In the Old Testament

The "seed" of the woman would bruise the head of the Serpent (Gen 3:15). While "seed" covers the range of ideas from a single embryo to generations of descendants, the concept requires children in order to be fulfilled.

The "seed" of Abraham was counted in the continuation of the perennial covenant of grace that God made with Abraham (Gen 17:7, 9, 19, 21).

The children were spared in the Exodus and were the ones set apart to enter and inherit the covenant's land of promise (Num14:31).

The children, as subjects with fundamental rights and duties, are present at the repetition and renewal of the covenant before entering the Land of promises (together with others who normally suffered as victims of oppression: women, servants and the foreigner) (Deut 29: 9-14; 31:10-13);

The children are the key indicator that the messianic age has arrived: a child will shepherd the lion and the lamb-- they are the key indicator of the wholesome restoration and Shalom (Isaiah 9 and 11; and Isaiah 65: 17-24)! God ordains praise from the mouths of children, even from newborns (Psalm 8:2). From their earliest days children cannot but glorify God, and so reveal that they are part of the foundation of his divine system on earth.

Children are to be treasured as gifts from God; Psalm 127:3: "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him."

In the New Testament:

Children are central in Jesus' priorities: "Let the little children come to me." Children are vindicated in their position in the Kingdom of Heaven as subjects with rights, duties, social protection and responsibility (Mark10:14; Matt 18:1-10).

Children are in the vision of revelations and at the end of history and they will celebrate at the throne (Rev. 19:5)!

In Both OT and NT

The children are considered by God as persons in the full scope of their development, even from their very embryonic conception. Hence, they are subjects of rights, empowerment and purpose in God's plans. (Ex 21:22-25; Psalm 139:13-16; Is 49:1; Jer. 1:5; Ezek 16: 4-6; Luke 1:15).

A restored world is prophetically envisioned only when the hearts of the parents (adults) are turned to the children (Mal 4:6 and Luke 1:17)

Conclusion: God values children in their present child-like state, not only as the future adults of the world.

Missions have sometimes viewed children as a missiological strategy. It goes without saying that it is absolutely vital that we do our part in giving children an opportunity to respond to the Gospel. However, children are more than a strategy. Children are important not just because there are so many of them, but because they have dignity and value in and of themselves. Yet many of these dignified and valued children among us are sick, hungry, uneducated, abused, and exploited. "If the kingdom of God belongs to children, and if the children of this world are not doing well, then Christian mission needs to rethink its priorities, strategies, and methods" (Myers, 102). We need to make sure our ministry strategies make sense in the world of children, that children are full participants in the church, and that our ministries offer the whole Gospel to children.

Children are voiceless in almost all societies; how can we be a voice for them?

How can we rethink our priorities, strategies, and methods to address the injustices that plague children?

While child evangelism is so important, we must be mindful that children are more than just targets for evangelism. They are whole people with the holistic need of a total gospel that addresses their total person and context, including the families that shape them. Ministry to children will be most effective when the ministry is centred on the understanding that they are integral members of families. We need to acknowledge that work with families and children is real missions work, and we should encourage both men and women to be mindful of how they might have an opportunity to serve children in their family context. We need to offer to work with churches to strengthen not just marriages, but entire families. We must step away from the dualism between working with children in social care ministries and working in children's spiritual ministries. We can ask a simple evaluation question for all ministries and projects: "How does this ministry / project impact children?" or "What are the needs of children that could be met through this ministry / project?" So many times, the vision of a better tomorrow is surprisingly grasped in such a clear and uncomplicated way by children. We must take them into account by asking them what kind of future world they desire to live in (in terms of values, security, relationships, and commodities), and help them work towards it.

The Rights of Children

We must encourage the churches we work with to have high standards for the intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development of children in which the renewal of the mind with a biblical world view is a priority. We also have a responsibility to educate mission personnel and church/ministry partners on the importance of defending the rights of the vulnerable, including children.

The core principles undergirding the Rights of the Child are non-discrimination, devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival, and development; and respect for the views of the child (UNICEF). These rights must be considered and presented within the more important framework of a biblical worldview and understanding.

The Rights of the Child include the right:

- to life and survival
- to develop to the fullest
- to protection from harmful influences, abuse, and exploitation
- to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life.

General Education

"Change the mindset of the next generation and you will change the world in which they live. Make disciples of the children and you will be 'making disciples of all nations'."
(Vreugdenhil)

In 2008, 140 delegates from 32 African nations met to engage with the theme of *Transforming Education; God's Redemptive Plan for Reaching the Lost and Future Generations of Africa*. The group agreed that the only real way to bring transformation to the current world views that lead to war, crime, poverty, and illness on the continent is the education of children. "What is needed is not only a gospel of salvation but a gospel of the kingdom... if the church does not disciple Africa's children in a Biblical worldview (*through Christian schooling*), nothing will change" (Vreugdenhil, pg. 3). The sentiment of the urgency and priority of Christian education has been heard from church leaders in South America and Asia, also.

Unlike in other proximate cultures in their day, the inter-testamental Galileans resisted the intrusion of Hellenistic culture, and maintained a reasonable equity in the treatment of Galilean

boys and girls. This was demonstrated in the value of education: girls received education in the Torah just as boys did (Van Der Laan). This is why Mary, Jesus' mother, in her song recorded in the first chapter of Luke, was able to quote so many parts of the Old Testament. She was educated and so saturated with Biblical knowledge that shaped her worldview!

The education of girls is intrinsically important, but also has an urgency to help alleviate economic inequities should these girls become mothers. "Education of women is associated with lower child mortality rates, improvement of child care and nutrition, reduction of average family size, literacy in succeeding generations, and improvement of family income-generating capacity... Women are the keys to change and have the most impact on the lives of children. (Myers, 102).

Protection from Abuse

A child can suffer the injustices of abuse even before birth: abuse of the mother during pregnancy, a mother's intentional negligence of her unborn child, and abortion of that child. Once born, the child may face psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. It can be committed by parents, neighbours, family friends, stranger, and even church leaders. Most grievous is that child abuse occurs in Christian homes and ministry settings. The levels of physical and sexual abuse are sickeningly high and often simply tolerated. The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) studies show that the recurrent traumas faced by children do not simply get better and go away over time; rather, these continue to affect the emotional, social, and physical health of people in their adult lives (CDC). No matter the circumstance, a child is never at fault; the child is always the victim

We will do well to help our fellow believers move away from a philosophy that children are a possession belonging to the parents, and move toward an understanding that children are individuals with dignity and rights entrusted to their parents by God. Parenting can be viewed as a form of stewardship: responsibly developing the God-given potential in each child for God's glory. We must teach at every opportunity, and especially in discipleship settings, that violence against children is never acceptable. To enhance an understanding of the issues involved in violence against children, we should encourage that everyone involved with us in children's ministry study the "United Nations Secretary-General's Study on Violence Against Children Adapted for Children and Young People."

"Historically Churches and Christian organizations have grossly failed children in this area (*abuse*). There are countless cases of priests, pastors, youth pastors and children's workers abusing children. This has occurred due to abusers having easy access to children in Christian settings and the church not having measures in place to protect children" (Jennings). It is recommended that all projects and ministries have a child protection policy which applies to them directly, is appropriate for their context, and gives clear guidance on how to prevent abuse and respond to it once it happens. Our partner churches should be encouraged and equipped to do the same.

Other injustices: In choosing not to deal openly with the severe injustices against children (including bonded labour, slavery/trafficked children, child soldiers, and victims of abuse), our silence may be read, even by children, as condoning them.

Gender: We must make sure our ministries to children do not involve gender discrimination. We must also actively work against the injustice committed against the girl child, including discrimination and abuse toward girl children through child marriage, exploitation, girl child labour, female genital mutilation, and selective abortion. Girl children need our preferential help.

Race: We must also be more aware of the added burden that race discrimination places on children. Studies have shown that an awareness of racism affects children's development both socially and academically.

Culture: Related to a child's culture, we affirm the the importance of mother tongue ministries, as a child's loss of their mother language also brings a corresponding loss of identity.

Also related to preservation of the child's culture, we emphasise that a child's well-being must take precedence over convenient placements of short term missionaries in children's ministries. In this context, we must avoid adverse assimilation of the short term missionary's culture by young recipients. This burden of responsibility falls on the short term missionary; they must be cautioned to be mindful of what they may be transferring to the child from their home culture lifestyle.

Climate: Climate change campaigners and development NGOs say that the failure of Copenhagen has signed the death warrant for hundreds of thousands of the world's poorest and that a quarter of a million children will die before world leaders meet again to try to thrash out another deal at the United Nations next climate change conference. First among them may be the children of the high mountains (Kelly).

Climate and population shifts also threaten recent advances in child rights. Children are particularly vulnerable to their effects due to their physiological immaturity and the sensitivity of many of the main killers of young children – including under-nutrition and vector borne diseases – to climatic conditions. Increasing evidence suggests that the world's least developed countries, which have burgeoning child populations, are likely to bear the brunt of environmental shifts. The growing correlation between civil strife and climate change is an area of particular concern for child rights. Greater stresses on economic resources, food and water supplies will potentially exacerbate existing inequities in income and access to essential services.

The risks to child rights from the current economic crisis and other external challenges must not be underestimated: There is a real danger that the repercussions of these shocks will have lifelong consequences that span generations, undermining efforts to advance the wellbeing of children for the coming decades. At the same time, history shows that such crises can be opportunities for change. The Convention on the Rights of the Child must have a central role in this realignment of priorities.

CONCLUSION:

"Our goal should be that ministries to children are capacity building ministries that produce churches and workers that reach out to all children in a holistic way, protecting them and their rights and defending them wherever necessary" (Zimmermann).

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