

# HUMANITARIAN ACTION: THE CHALLENGE FOR AFRICAN YOUTH

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Nelson Mandela once said, *“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that a son of a mineworker can become the head of the mine that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another. I dream of an Africa which is in peace with itself.”*<sup>1</sup>

In today's global world, where we are all interconnected, states cannot afford to live in isolation. There is a growing awareness that we need to work together to address African humanitarian crisis situations. Working together for the common good is highly vital to save the millions of African people, whose lives are threatened by natural disasters, wars, famines and epidemics. Therefore, humanitarianism in this context refers to the practice of humane treatment by providing assistance to others, that it is the belief that the sole moral obligation of humankind is the improvement of human welfare. All human beings deserve respect and dignity; therefore, humanitarians work by advancing the well-being of humanity as a whole.

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## HUMANITARIAN ACTION

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The challenge for young Africans covers a wide range of issues. The youth in Africa face several challenges. Demographically they constitute the majority of African population. However, they are growing in a society with political instability, armed conflicts, alarming spread of HIV/AIDS and other health-related problems. They also suffer from lack of ample employment opportunities and sufficient amounts of quality education. That said, the fundamental challenge confronting African youths lie in the economic and social arena. This all relates to the humanitarian crisis situations in which the human rights violations exist and refugee situations occur – how do these humanitarian crises affect the development of the African youths?

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## HUMAN RIGHTS

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There are new challenges and opportunities for the overall human rights situation in the African continent. The spread of human right awareness in Africa dates only from the 1970s and this is due to the work of Amnesty International and increasing pressure for democracy and freedom of expression. Amnesty

International has expressed deep concern about the deteriorating human rights and security situation in the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe, Sudan and Sierra Leone. Most of the African youth victims whose rights have been violated, live in poverty, on the margins of society, with little education and few job prospects. Massive human rights violations have occurred whereby millions of youths have no access to education, work long hours under hazardous conditions, are forced to become soldiers, or languish in orphanages or detention centers where they endure inhumane conditions and daily assaults on their dignity.

Government soldiers have also abused the human rights of journalists and other human rights defenders who have spoken out against this kind of human rights violations. Such violations include slavery, mass disappearances, torture, denial of free speech and access to the press. They also concern essential values of dignity and freedom, work, health, education, food, housing, communication, social security, and development. For the larger part of human existence, the struggle for the assertion of rights has not come easily, yet these concerns have only recently gained increased understanding, importance and acceptability within and amongst policy makers, and practitioners. The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted June 27, states in its Article 5 that "every individual shall have the right to the respect of the dignity inherent in a human being and to the recognition of his legal status. All forms of exploitation and degradation of man particularly slavery, slave trade, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment and treatment shall be prohibited." Therefore we need to be deeply concerned for the safety and physical well-being of these young people, although some complaints may not be reported due to the widespread lack of confidence in the justice system and the climate of impunity which exists. African governments need to bring those responsible to justice. Governments have the responsibility and duty to investigate the violations of children and youths that have occurred to date, to bring those responsible to trial and, in addition, to take the necessary measures to ensure that this phenomenon is not repeated in the future.

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## **EDUCATION AND HIV/AIDS**

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HIV/AIDS has had a devastating and unprecedented impact on the human rights of African children. More than 2.2 million people died of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa alone in 2004, the vast majority of them adults of child-bearing age. By the end of 2004, more than 25 million people were living with HIV/AIDS in the region, meaning the worst is yet to come in terms of AIDS-related mortality unless HIV/AIDS treatment becomes vastly more available. Women suffer the greatest burden of the HIV/AIDS as AIDS orphans generations of children. In the countries hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, such as Botswana and Zimbabwe, children orphaned by AIDS represent over 75% of all orphans in the country.

Education is an essential human need, yet even before HIV/AIDS it remained out of reach for millions of children in Africa. The right to education is recognized in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), which calls

on states to “provide free and compulsory basic education” and to “encourage the development of secondary education in its different forms and to progressively make it free and accessible to all.” The African Charter specifically calls for “measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. In addition, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), estimated net primary school enrollment in Africa to be 70% among boys and 63% among girls. In previous reports on Kenya, Togo, and Zambia, Human Rights Watch documented numerous abuses against parentless AIDS-affected children including abandonment, hazardous child labor, trafficking, sexual abuse, and other violations of legal rights, and discrimination in access to public benefits. Governments bear the ultimate responsibility for protecting children from abuse and neglect, however most have failed to establish and enforce effective legal mechanisms to hold caregivers and other abusers accountable. Also social inequalities, the failure of elementary and university education to provide the youth with skills required in productive economic activities, results in massive youth unemployment, economic and social deterioration. The agitation expressed in the form of strikes in schools, public demonstration, clashes with law enforcement officials and total or partial paralysis of schools and universities has repercussions. It has accelerated the process of the return to democracy and the effort under way in many countries to meet the aspirations of the youth and active population.

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## INTERNAL CONFLICTS

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The common example of the many African problems is internal conflicts. They emerged in the post colonial era and have been provoked by ethnicism and social injustice, inequalities, political repression and intolerance. African conflicts usually revolve around competition for political spoils. The search for solutions to the many causes of violent conflict grows at a time when Africa has been affected by a series of wars and disasters that have resulted in human tragedy of an unimaginable scale. These tragedies cause not only casualties and refugees but contribute vastly to the spread of disease, malnutrition and starvation, social and economic decline and moral deterioration. Therefore the primacy of peace and security, both at national and regional levels, to everything else in Africa cannot be over-emphasized. Without durable peace and the security of life, property and national borders, it is not possible for African youths, citizens, economic actors and governments alike to plan, implement and undertake all necessary activities that are required so urgently to arrest the protracted decline and stagnation in the region.

Since independence, Africa has also suffered severely from natural disasters, especially widespread prolonged drought in many parts of the continent. The resultant famines led to deaths and stunted growth of millions of children, with serious consequences for years to come.

Africa has also had its fair share of refugees, some of whom have fled as individuals from human rights violations in countries where conflict may not yet have broken out, others are involved in mass migrations either across international

borders or within their own countries. The immediate cause of some mass migrations into neighboring countries is famine but the ultimate cause is usually civil war. The ICRC has helped greatly with conflict prevention in Africa. By using humanitarian action to promote integration and to encourage the AU to draw on the ICRC in matters pertaining to humanitarian law. Also, due to the high number of casualties, the ICRC is in contact with the AU Commission with regards to refugees and internally displaced persons. The ICRC has urged the AU to promote humanitarian programmes. In addition, in order to maintain international peace and security, the United Nations Charter provides for arrangements to promote the peaceful settlement of dispute as well as for enforcement of its decisions by means of force.

Part of the reason Africa is under-developed is due to the inability of Africans to train or cater to their youths. It is pertinent to know that each youth is a foundation and pillar for the next generation. Africans must develop a culture where training of our youths becomes part of our developmental plan. The future of Africa is her youth. No society can survive without a proper training programme for their youth.

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## **SOLUTIONS**

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African youths can be empowered as they grow to become tomorrow's leaders. Governments, international organizations and NGOs assist them in their personal development through training for skill acquisition towards meaningful contributions to communal development. The challenges confronting the African continent from a youth perspective show that all young people, not just in Africa, share the common value of preparing themselves for a meaningful adult life, seeking to ensure economic independence, and becoming productive members of their societies. Young people need institutional and leadership support, peace, access to good educational, social and health facilities, and productive and enjoyable leisure time, these being all the common necessities young people crave for all over the world irrespective of their race, religion, gender, culture, beliefs or color. They should be enabled to participate as both creators and beneficiaries of development. The youths are recognizing more and more that unemployment, illiteracy, discrimination against indigenous young people and young people with disabilities, discrimination based on religious beliefs and all other forms of social exclusion are threats to African development both now and beyond. The African youths can and should be part of the solutions to the problems plaguing the continent. They have been showing strong commitment and getting involved in all phases of global development practices, having shown that they are not obstacles but invaluable resources of development. Youths are building democratic leadership, civil society, and social capital. To this end, active involvement in decision making on all levels, participation in human development and capacity building are invaluable access to the evolution of a growing sustainable society.

I have developed a framework for achieving youth development in Africa, something that can be achieved tomorrow. To that end, we need to set attainable,

concrete performance-based goals. Goals that are short term because we want to take into account today not tomorrow.

- therefore, we need to make sure we help the youth fight corruption and not accept it as a fact of daily life;
- we need to set a target for what can be changed tomorrow and not next year;
- things need to happen more on a local and regional level rather than a national level.
- educate the youths to help empower and inspire them and stop the spread of ignorance.

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### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> A selected quote by Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, joint winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and world acclaimed international statesman.