

Debt Overhang

The link between Africa's debt burden and poverty is obvious. Debt burden increases fiscal obligations in the public sector, undermines prospects of economic growth and contributes to sustaining poverty. Women and children constitute the largest percentage of Africa's population that is below absolute poverty levels. Debt stocks in West Africa are huge. Liberia's, for example, is currently estimated at US\$3 billion with nearly half being owed to multilateral creditors, 37 percent to bilateral national partners and 13 percent to private or commercial creditors. Debt servicing in 1998 required 70 percent of the export earnings of an underperforming economy. Clearly, for Liberia and other African countries as well as other highly indebted poor countries (HIPC) debt relief that releases resource for poverty reduction is imperative.

CONCLUSIONS FROM CURRENT STATE OF WEST AFRICA'S CHILDREN

What conclusions can we draw from the current state of children in West Africa? First, that the state of our children offers the clearest expression of our state of underdevelopment; that far from being a consequence of underdevelopment, failure to successfully address children's issues is a principal cause of underdevelopment and continued failure is the best way to assure West Africa's consignment to a prolong state of poverty, conflict and underdevelopment.

Second, put in proper perspective, abuse of children and failure to successfully address issues concerning West Africa's children must be seen as a problem exacerbated in some countries by violent conflict but overall, a problem rooted deeply in misguided policies and practices at the national and sub-regional levels and-for a long time also at the international level. Failure to address children's issues is part of poor governance strategies and practices that cause conflicts and conflicts, in turn, exacerbate the plight of children. Therefore the question of "war-affected children" can be properly addressed when considered within the framework of wider concerns about systems of governance that have historically victimized all children. The question, therefore, has to do not only with how war has affected some children that are classified as "war-affected children" but also how the prolonged marginalization and victimization of children through bad governance and other factors have produced violent conflicts, poverty and underdevelopment.

Third, that considerations of children's issues are inseparable from considerations of issues of gender equality and equity; and as such, issues of women empowerment and the protection and promotion of the rights of children should be treated in a manner that recognizes their co-terminality .

Fourth, the various dimensions of the problem of children as posited in the Convention on the Rights of the Child-problems of survival, development and learning, protection and participation-are inter-linked and inseparable and as such, require integrated multidimensional