

Basic to the question of protection is the establishment and recognition of unambiguous legal status of children so as to ensure that each child's rights and entitlements can be respected and protected. To begin with, in most African countries, the legal definition of a child varies from one circumstance to another. In many cases working age, voting age, age of majority, and age of criminal responsibility are often different with obvious implications for the protection of children against an array of abuses.

Abuse and Exploitation

In situations of armed conflict, such abuse and exploitation have become more pronounced. Liberia, for example, today has one of the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the world. During the civil war, about 20 percent of combatants were children of 15 years old or lower. These and thousands others were both the objects as well as the perpetrators of heinous crimes and other abuses including sexual abuse and exploitation, drug and alcohol abuse and labor exploitation, displacement and disability. The case of Sierra Leone is legendary. Accusation of engaging in slavery has occasionally been levelled against one ECOWAS country. In both Sierra Leone and Liberia and many other West African countries, the armies' street children came be found in urban areas as juvenile delinquency and criminality among youth and children rise. Armed robbery by children and youth is a newly emerging development not only in post-conflict countries but also in other West African countries.

Remedial Measures

The protection of children requires a combination of appropriate laws, strengthened enforcement and rehabilitation institutions, relevant and effective educational systems, and above all, empowered families and local communities, among other things.

Participation of Children

Learning the Art of Participation

Often misunderstood to mean the relinquishing of parental guidance, child participation is essential in ensuring the development of children into efficacious, resourceful citizens rather than passive subjects. It entails enabling children to begin to develop a sense of responsible participation in decision-making, a deep appreciation of the humanity and worth of themselves and others, tolerance and respect for opposing views, importance of and how to take initiatives, strike compromises and lead wholesome, productive lives as members of families, communities and nations. In addition to developing technical, vocational and other skills related to ensuring economic empowerment, children must be assisted in developing the requisite skills and gaining access to information that will help to make them decent human beings, good citizens, productive and responsible workers and contributing members of their families and communities. While efforts are increasing to achieve these, the paucity of institutional and individual role models as well as cultural practices pose obstacles that need to be surmounted. Child participation must be enhanced as part of a general culture of empowered participation. Too often, concepts of discipline as practiced in our schools and homes tend to support authoritarian values much more than values of efficacy and inquiry.