



## Press Release Day of the African Child 16th June 2008

In order to mark the Day of the African Child on 16th June the Non Governmental Organisation, Stepping Stones Nigeria, has called upon all stakeholders to unite in the fight against child abandonment, torture and trafficking in Nigeria. The issue of child witches and the subsequent violations of children's rights that takes place due to this erroneous belief has been the subject of intense international media attention in the last 12 months. States such as Akwa Ibom and Cross River are well known for the high numbers of abandoned children on their streets. Estimates place the numbers of children that have been stigmatised as "witches" in these states alone at 15,000. However this superstitious belief is also know to be prevalent in many other regions of Nigeria.

According to Gary Foxcroft, the UK director of Stepping Stones Nigeria, "this belief is leading to thousands of children being imprisoned in prayer houses, starved, beaten and even killed. Akwa Ibom state has a particularly high rate of child abandonment due to this belief. Such children then become easy prey for the numerous traffickers that operate in the region. Not only is this issue causing irreparable damage to the lives of these innocent children, it also paints a very negative image of Akwa Ibom State and Nigeria to the international community".

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child declares: "State parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians or family members". In addition, the four core principles of the convention are "non-discrimination, devotion to the best interests of the child, the right of life, survival and development, and respect for the views of the child".

Nigeria has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which it implemented in its Child Rights Act of 2003 dealing specifically with forms of child abuse hitherto left unpunished by previous criminal codes. However it has been adopted by only 14 of the 37 Nigerian states and can therefore not be considered fully operational. Neither Akwa Ibom State or Cross River State has adopted the Child Rights Act. According to the Nigerian Programme Director of Stepping Stones Nigeria, Lucky Inyang, these states have a "moral obligation to do everything in their power to enact the Child Rights Act as quickly as possible".

Stepping Stones Nigeria is calling for all stakeholders to unite behind its Prevent Abandonment of Children Today (PACT) campaign and help to protect and save the lives of these innocent children. The PACT campaign was launched in 2006 in an attempt to encourage dialogue on the issue of child witches and to seek a long-term solution to the problem of child abandonment due to witchcraft belief. The key demands that the PACT campaign makes are that the Akwa Ibom State government enacts the Child Rights Act and begins to regulate the churches known to be carrying out violations of child rights. Stepping Stones Nigeria is also calling for the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) to ban all films that promote superstitious beliefs and lead to abuses of children's rights. They argue that films such as those produced by Liberty Films, which are well known for their mythical portrayals of child witches, fuel the belief in child witchcraft and therefore lead to innocent children being stigmatised and abused.

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