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Child Rights Activists Respond to Recent Press Attacks on their Work with So-Called Child Witches in Akwa Ibom State

In response to recent articles, most recently one entitled “One Big Scam” in The News Magazineⁱ, the NGOs Stepping Stones Nigeria and CRARN have moved to reassure its supporters that ongoing allegations made against them are not true and that they remain as committed as ever to fighting for the rights of children stigmatised as witches. Since the multi-award winningⁱⁱ documentary – Saving Africa’s Witch Children – was first broadcast in 2008ⁱⁱⁱ, allegations have arisen stating that these NGOs have been fraudulently soliciting funds from the public at the expense of children in Nigeria^{iv}.

Responding to these ongoing allegations, Stepping Stones Nigeria’s Programme Director, Gary Foxcroft said: “I refute these allegations entirely. It is clear that our work with so-called child witches in Nigeria has upset many powerful people who would prefer that this issue had never been brought to the attention of the International community. Such people, some of them who have made a great deal of money from spreading the mythical belief in child witches, will often use everything in their power to protect their interests”.

Foxcroft further stated: “Stepping Stones Nigeria, as a UK registered charity^v, publishes annual reports^{vi} and accounts which are all publicly available. We are committed to upholding the highest standards of transparency and accountability. All funds donated to the charity are used to support the local partner organisations that we work with in the Niger Delta^{vii} to bring about lasting changes in the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged children. It is a pity that the fake apostles who have established churches in Nigeria and made fortunes from preaching about witchcraft are not also regulated and made to publish such reports. Such allegations are clearly being made in an attempt to distract us from our important day-to-day work”.

The Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN)^{viii} children’s centre was established in 2003 in order to protect the lives of children that were stigmatised as witches in Akwa Ibom State. It is the only such project in Nigeria that provides care and support to such children. When Stepping Stones Nigeria began partnering with CRARN in 2006, there were around 30 children in the centre. Today, with support from Stepping Stones Nigeria, the centre provides refuge, education, healthcare and hope to over 200 children. Speaking from the CRARN centre in Eket, Sam Itauma, President of CRARN had this to say: “It is a nonsense to state that donations made have not been used to help the children. Stepping Stones Nigeria currently provides funding for 20 staff wages at the centre, food, clothing and medical costs for the children. In addition to this they helped CRARN to build the CRARN academy school and boy’s dormitory block^{ix}, buy various plots of land and carry out our important advocacy work. I wonder why these child witch hunters are so rattled when there are multiple suits in court regarding the issue of child witches. Maybe they don’t have confidence in the judicial process? As for CRARN and Stepping Stones Nigeria, we have no doubt that the truth will prevail”.

After having received threats to his life after the broadcast of the documentary in 2008, Itauma now has to sleep in different locations in order to protect himself from the forces of darkness that seem to be intent on destroying him and the work of CRARN. Despite this Sam said: “Just like our friend and supporter, Governor Akpabio^x, we believe that all children are innocent and sacred. They should be loved and protected. Unfortunately in Nigeria today,

children are still being tortured, abused and killed on a daily basis due to the belief in child witches; a belief that many people have profited from. We are doing everything in our power to bring positive change to the lives of these needy children, despite the many obstacles in our way”.

CRARN and Stepping Stones Nigeria remain united in their commitment to upholding the rights of stigmatised children and refuse to be intimidated by such unproven and meaningless allegations of fraud. Both organisations vow to continue their work unabated and will not stop until the horrific abuse of children stigmatised as witches is eradicated once and for all.

Notes to Editors

ⁱ <http://thenewsng.com/nation/one-big-scam/2010/03>

ⁱⁱ The film won the Amnesty Media Award, BAFTA, Emmy and One World awards

ⁱⁱⁱ The documentary will be broadcast on HBO in USA on 19th May 2010

^{iv} <http://libertyfoundationgospelministries.org/downloads.html>

^v Stepping Stones Nigeria is registered with the England and Wales Charity Commission No. 1112476

^{vi} Stepping Stones Nigeria’s latest accounts can be found at <http://www.steppingstonesnigeria.org/annualreports>

^{vii} Stepping Stones Nigeria supports five local partner organisations in the Niger Delta. These are:

- The Stepping Stones Model School
- The Bebor International Model School
- The Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN)
- Stepping Stones Nigeria Child Empowerment Foundation (SSNCEF)
- The University of Uyo Jolly Phonics Team

^{viii} CRARN is registered as an NGO with the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC) in Abuja, Nigeria. CAC/IT/No 27195

^{ix} This was made possible thanks to £20,000 funding from Akwa Ibom State Government in 2006

For more information about this press release please contact Gary Foxcroft, Programme Director, Stepping Stones Nigeria at gary@steppingstonesnigeria.org or 0845 313 8391.